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Cover by ROBERT GIBSON JONES
"THE JUSTICE OF TOR"

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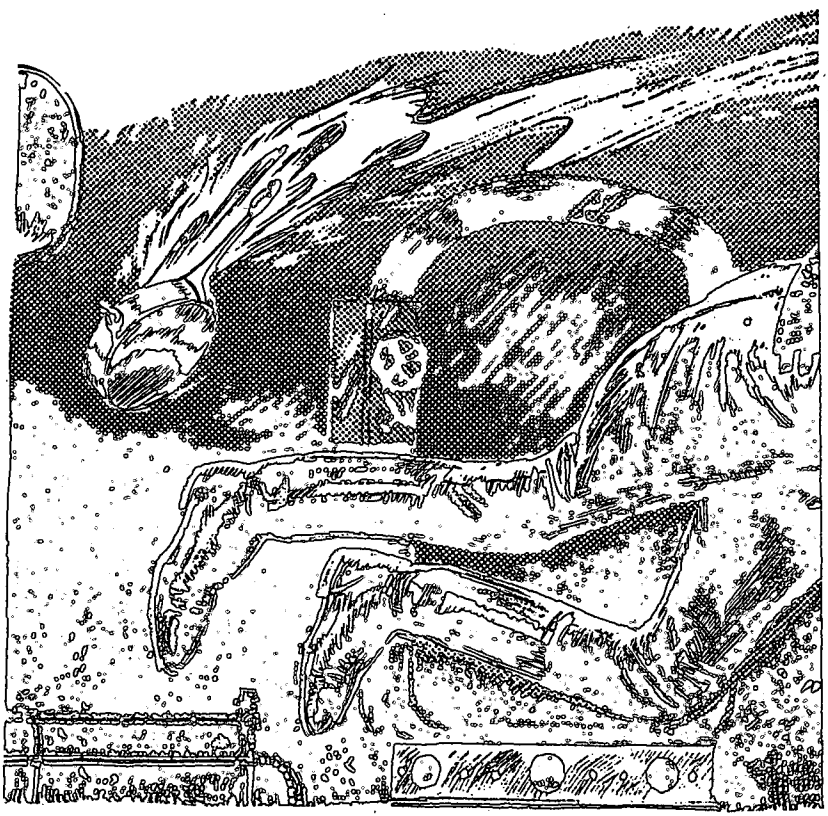
The JUSTICE of TOR

By Franklin Bahl

They came to the asteroid to claim the beautiful Bea-Amna as a prize. But her capture meant that one of them had to die!



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When I wrote "The Face Beyond the Veil" I thought it was a very nice ending to have Bea-Anna turning thumbs down on the men she had encountered in our solar system and go running out into space again. Although some of the readers agreed with me, many of them protested that I just couldn't let her do that without satisfying their curiosity about her.

I didn't see how I could since she had already gone and there just wasn't enough fuel in my jets to go fetch her back. Then came the following note:

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Dear Franklin:

When are you going to supply the sequel to "The Face Beyond the Veil?" You can't leave Dave and Zaney hanging in space like that, you just can't. I want to find out who Bea-Anna is, her origin, the mystery of her enseal-ment and what happens when they release her. It's the most provocative story in late years—a woman able to guide her space-ship yet unable to burst out of her prison. I'll be looking forward to it.

Robert E. Warner
5700 Presley Way
Oakland, California

Well, that did it. The guy that said "Flattery will get you nowhere" belongs to a different political party than I do. I paid up my dues two months in advance in the Asteroid Belt Liars Club so they wouldn't kick me off the roster while I was gone, placed an Occupied card on my favorite easy chair on the upper deck of that old artificial satellite the club bought from the Interplanetary Government for a club house, and blasted off, following the now faint ion trail of the S.P. lifeboat, knowing that the odds were against my ever returning with the story of what happened to Dave and Zaney. But I did and here it is.

—Franklin Bahl

"HOW FAR out are we, Davey?" Zaney Smith asked quietly.

Dave Armet slid his feet off the bunk and stood up. Stretching lazily he went over to the *orienter*. Standard equipment on all spaceships, it was a robot device with tracking photocells permanently fixed on the Sun, Polaris, and Sirius, with an electronic calculator that constantly integrated the elements of the trajectory of the ship, giving its exact location every ten minutes.

"Close to forty-eight billion miles, Zaney," he said. His eyes went to the autopilot panel and widened in surprise. "Looks like we're only two hours from Lark Planetoid. Must have been asleep."

"Thought so," Zaney said. "You been sleeping a long time. Almost twenty-four hours. Something funny in that. Bet that damn woman's got something to do with it."

Dave laughed. "You're always blaming things on Bea-Anna," he said. "Get up off those callouses on your shoulder blades. We can make out details of the surface of the planetoid now and decide what to do."

"That's going to be a problem," Zaney said, sliding spryly out of his bunk. "But if you think Bea-Anna isn't at the bottom of everything that happens you don't know women. Why, its a woman's nature to pry into things and keep the pot boiling. And she isn't any different than the rest, even if she wasn't born on the Earth. I'll bet you the reason she was imprisoned in that fancy spaceship prison was because her husband got tired of her meddling in his affairs all the time."

"Husband?" Dave exclaimed, startled at the thought.

Zaney chortled. "Never occurred to you she might be married," he said. "First thing I thought of. I thought, 'By gollies, why didn't I think of that myself. I could have stayed on Earth instead of running off to be a space prospector.' "

"So that's your secret!" Dave said. "You're an alimony refugee."

"What if I am," Zaney grumbled. "Not that I'm admitting it," he added hastily. He rubbed his whiskers thoughtfully, started to say something,

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then clamped his mouth closed.

Dave turned to the visual telescope. Zaney stared at his back uncomfortably.

"Look at the way she's done, Davey," he said. "As near as we can figure she was travelling through space, for God knows how many millions of years. She reached the Solar System. Instead of contacting one of the planet governments she took an orbit and waited until she could contact somebody by telepathy. Then what? Instead of contacting just one person she contacted me, you and your partner Bill, and Rek Barker and his gang of cutthroats. Why? To make trouble."

"Her telepathic call went in every direction," Dave said without taking his eyes from the telescope. "It would only go so far before it became too weak for anyone to catch it. She stopped when you got there."

"Maybe!" Zaney snorted. "Anyway, the fun started. Rek got me and tortured her orbit data out of me, then towed her ship to his hideout in Lark Planetoid. Red had her at his mercy until you showed up. You turned the tables and went for help. And what did she do? She picked up her skirts and ran. Played you for a sucker."

"She must have had her reasons," Dave said, unperturbed. "Take a look, Zaney. See if you can make out that hole in the surface where we took off from when we left. It would be much smarter to go back through that pipestem fault to the hollow center of the planetoid than to go in through the big opening on the other side past all the big guns. We'd be blasted for sure, since this is a Space Patrol life ship with the S.P. emblem on it."

"And that damn woman'd let them," Zaney muttered as he took Dave's place at the telescope.

A moment later he motioned to Dave with his arm. Dave looked and saw the dark spot. He glanced up at Zaney with a tight grin. Then he adjusted the telescope so that its cross hairs were on the dark spot, flicked in the tracker calculator and guided the telescope manually until the calculator had *fixed* it, then pressed the button that hooked in the robot pilot and the robot navigator units. They took over and began the task of landing the ship in that hole without a jar.

They strapped themselves into their bunks. Dave closed his eyes and tried to make contact with Bea-Anna. He sent out the thought that they were landin. He sent it out repeatedly, trying to sense whether she were aware of his thought or not.

There was not the slightest sign of response. There had been no thought from her since that brief telepathic contact she had made to give her position and trajectory. Was she dead? Dave shook his head at the thought. Surely if she had died, she would have at least flashed him some message before death. No, he decided. She must be waiting for him to arrive before contacting him again.

"THAT WAS the smoothest landing I've ever experienced," Dave said. "These S.P. ships are really built!"

He and Zaney unstrapped themselves and got out of their bunks Zaney went to the spacesuit locker.

"Well looky these!" he said delightedly.

He took one of the suits out. It was an iridescent yellow with bold red letters on chest and back. In outer space where ultraviolets are strong it would glow like fire.

"Not too good for our purpose," Dave said. "They're painted so a man can be seen." His eyes lit up at a sudden thought. "Maybe they will be after all. The pirates may think two

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S.P. spacesuits mean there are more coming."

They slipped into the suits.

"Think there might be a reception committee outside the ship?" Zaney asked, pausing before entering the airlock.

"Not a chance," Dave said. "The rocket gases would have taken care of that if there were anyone."

Nevertheless both men made sure their g.i. automatics were free in their holsters for instant action.

They stepped into the airlock. Zaney pressed the red button that started the automatic action of closing the inner door, pumping most of the air into the storage tanks, and opening the outer door.

The rock wall of the pocket in Lark Planetoid they were in loomed in the black gloom, faintly sketched in white splotches where the hoar frost of frozen gases was already recongealing after being evaporated by the heat of the rockets.

Dave and Zaney searched the gloom for signs of movement. Then they jumped lightly, drifting slowly downward to the stone floor.

They quickly found the entrance to the pipestem leading downward in an erratic course, to come out under the hull of Rek Barker's headquarters ship moored to the inner surface of the planetoid.

Two hours later they emerged from the opening there.

"Rek's ship's gone!" Zaney exclaimed.

"Maybe the rest of the gang took it and escaped as soon as they learned we had escaped and taken Rek with us," Dave said. "So much the better. Now we won't have any trouble from that source."

"What about all the captives they had?" Zaney said. "They wouldn't bother to take them with them."

Dave looked out over the immense interior of the planetoid that was vaguely illuminated by the starlight entering through the two mile wide hole on the far side. Ships were moored here and there, forming huge clusters. Each of those ships, stolen by Rek Barker and his men over the years and brought here to be pillaged at leisure, was worth several million dollars.

If Lark Planetoid could ever be returned to the Solar System so those ships could be turned over to the authorities the salvage value would run into the billions!

But he wasn't interested in that. His eyes kept searching until they found the dull sphere that was Bea-Anna's ship. He felt his pulse quicken. She was still here!

"Bea-Anna!" he called in his thoughts. There was no answer.

He blanked his mind, listening for thoughts.

"Damn woman. We'll probably die in this blown egg of an asteroid."

It was Zaney Smith. There was no other tendril of thought. Dave looked out across the void at the round disc of unevenly bright light that was the heavens revealed through the two mile wide hole to the outside of Lark Planetoid. He stared at it for a long minute, then let his eyes roam through the gloom of the hollow interior with its topography of rough shadows. The realization pressed in about him that he and Zaney were alone.

There was no one here except Bea-Anna and themselves. The others were gone.

And the planetoid was hurtling away from the Solar System at a speed of over two thousand miles a second, already well beyond the orbit of Pluto.

"Bea-Anna!" Dave said sharply, aloud.

Zaney heard it through his suit

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radio. He regarded Dave gravely, reading in his expression the fact that they were alone here, the others gone.

"I didn't expect anything else, Davey," he said. "I expected Nels Bronson would take the rest of the gang and lam out of here the minute he discovered we had escaped. And the minute the pirates left, the others would get together and light out in one of the other ships. But it didn't make any difference anyway. You wanted to come after your lady love. Hell, this is as good a place to spend the rest of your life as any, isn't it?"

"Sure, Zaney," Dave said.

The two men grinned slowly at each other through their glassite helmets. On impulse they reached out and shook hands.

"STOP MAKING so damn much noise with those dishes!" Dave said.

Zaney paused in his setting of the table and blinked sympathetically at him. "Sure, Davey," he said placatingly.

"And stop calling me Davey," Dave said. "You may be an old man, but I'm not a child."

"All right, Dave," Zaney said. "You going over to Bea-Anna's ship again today?"

Dave sat down and cupped his face in his hands without answering.

"Why don't you find something to do Dave?" Zaney said. "You've got to start adjusting pretty soon. You're going to pieces."

"Who cares?" Dave muttered.

"Meaning Bea-Anna?" Zaney said. He carefully concealed his pity. "Maybe she doesn't know you're here," he suggested.

"Of course she knows I'm here!" Dave said.

"I've been wondering about it," Zaney went on. "There's no question but what she's at least thousands of years old. How does she occupy her mind? What does she do? We saw her immersed in that bowl up to her neck. She said it was a chemical bath that kept her immortal."

"Go on," Dave said, interested.

"Well," Zaney said, "if I was her on these long jaunts of thousands of years between solar systems I'd go to sleep and set the alarm to go off in the presence of gravity."

"But she wouldn't do that and let me die of old age here while she sleeps!" Dave protested.

"Wouldn't she?" Zaney said. "Then why did she run away from you? The minute the others had lammed and she was alone she started away from the Solar System, taking Lark Planetoid and everything in it with her, because her ship anchored too strongly to the rock to break free."

"But she told me her trajectory," Dave argued. "Unless she wanted me to come she wouldn't have done that."

"Maybe it was a slip," Zaney said. "You just got that. Nothing more." When Dave didn't say anything he added, "Maybe she was so sleepy then she couldn't stay awake until you arrived."

"You might be right, Zaney," Dave sighed. "Three weeks and not a whisper of thought from her. But I've got to keep trying. The only alternative is to give up and just—just—" He ended on an ineffectual tone. Anything else was unimaginable.

"We've got every device known to man here in Lark Planetoid," Zaney said. "You could start experimenting on something. Become a scientist. You could set up instruments to gather data about outer space between the stars. Speed of light, spectroscopic studies, a million other things. Maybe in time you could discover for yourself how to cut into that neutron matter. After all, it's only atoms like any other stuff."

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"Not the same," Dave corrected. "Its orbital electrons are collapsed onto the nucleus. The atoms are thousands of times closer together than ordinary matter."

"But they're still atoms," Zaney said. "I'll bet if we set up a cyclotron it could eat a hole through that wall in a few weeks."

"So you used to be a scientist!" Dave said softly.

"I didn't say it," Zaney said.

"No," Dave smiled, "but you thought it."

"You're snooping into my mind—" Zaney began irritably. He shrugged his shoulders. "Guess you can't help it," he muttered.

"Why don't you tell me about yourself," Dave said. "We're stuck here in Lark Planetoid for the rest of our lives. I'm beginning to suspect depths to you I'd like to get acquainted with, Zaney."

"Depths?" Zaney sneered. "I was just a young and innocent physicist who happened to fall in love with the wrong girl. When she got ready to she framed me and got a divorce with alimony enough to keep me broke forever. So I skipped and became a space prospector. Nothing to it. That story was old before the first rocket hit the Moon." He glared at Dave. "Sit down and eat your breakfast," he growled.

"WELL?" ZANEY said.

Dave shook his head. "Not there," he said. "Looks like Rek Barker and his gang managed to sell most of the cargo of the *Ranger V* too. Too bad Uranium and Gold aren't magnetic. There's enough of those two metals to build a dozen cyclotron magnets."

"The cyclotron is out then," Zaney said. "That's the last ship. There's not enough laminated transformer iron in the whole shootin' match, even if we tore down every motor and generator. That leaves the electrostatic devices—but wait! We've forgotten one of the ships."

"Mmmm," Dave said. "I've checked the cargos of every one."

"Not the Astrazomb," Zaney said.

Dave stared at him blankly a full minute.

"Come on," he exploded. "Funny I never thought of looking in Bea-Anna's ship."

"I'll bet you've never even explored it," Zaney said. "Me, I've wanted to, but it was sort of your territory. Now's my opportunity."

He slipped on his spacesuit and followed Dave out of the airlock of the *Martian Queen,* the huge luxury liner they had chosen as headquarters. An hour later they landed expertly in the open airlock of the globular ship.

"We'd better explore together," Zaney said. "Two pairs of eyes are better than one in looking at strange things, and I'll bet there's plenty of strange things aboard this ship."

The inner door opened as the airlock pressure became equal with that inside.

"Which way?" Zaney asked, slipping out of his spacesuit.

"To the left," Dave grunted. "I've never been far that way. The wall in front of Bea-Anna is all I've been interested in up to now."

They switched on lights as they went forward, lights that Rek Barker had had strung along the ceiling when his men had cleaned the dust of countless ages out of the entire ship with huge vacuum cleaners.

Here and there were unbolted pieces of what had once been machines before their insulation; paint, and every other aging substance had crumbled to dust.

"I guess Barker was planning on turning some of this stuff over to scientists to see what it was," Dave

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said after a half hour of silent exploration. "Take a look at that beautiful coil over there."

He stooped in front of it and studied it while Zaney stood behind him.

"An air core transformer, looks like," Dave muttered.

"No," Zaney said. "I guess we don't need to look for transformer iron any more. That had an iron core. It oxidized and turned to dust."

"An iron core big enough to fill that hole?" Dave said. "Why, that would take millions of years with a supply of air around it, and the air must have leaked out very shortly. In a thousand years at least."

"It makes me wonder," Zaney said slowly. "How does it happen that the things in Bea-Anna's prison haven't deteriorated? There must be electric wires covered with insulation, and lots of other things that aren't all noncorroding substances. There must be transformer cores in there, too."

"Don't go getting the cart before the horse, Zaney," Dave said. "We can't get in there until we find transformer iron out here."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Zaney said absently. "I was wondering why everything outside her prison on this ship was built to deteriorate, while everything inside it had to be built to last forever." He reached up to rub his whiskers. His hand paused as his eyes lit up. "That's another thing," he said. "Bea-Anna wanted you to go to Mars or Earth to get the devices necessary to break through the wall into her prison. She knew they couldn't be found here."

"Then we're licked," Dave said.

"Maybe," Zaney said thoughtfully. "You go to your post at the wall. I want to just wander around the ship. Maybe I'll get an idea. At least it'll kill time. Some of this stuff is interesting."

"I'VE BEEN around people too much lately," Zaney muttered. "Damn Davey for waking up the past. Of course, he's young. He doesn't know that memories a man's spent years forgetting shouldn't be touched on."

He wandered further through the halls and rooms of the Astrazomb that surrounded the huge cylinder of neutron matter that formed Bea-Anna's prison. Most of the rooms contained nothing at all. Others contained metal furniture. Stainless steel, monel metal, and other alloys.

"Now I wonder why there would be desks and furniture here unless there were people out here at one time," he muttered. "I'll bet that's it. There were people out here in the beginning. They all died off. Their bones turned to dust and were sucked out with the rest of the dust when those vacuum cleaners went to work in here."

He continued to stare at the desk. There were drawers. He bent down and pulled one open. It had the same action as drawers in cabinets on regular space ships, having to be lifted a quarter of an inch before being pulled out. It was empty. The others were empty too.

"I wonder why these people went along with Bea-Anna?" Zaney said, talking to himself. "If they couldn't control the flight of the ship through space or get in to Bea-Anna why would they be needed? To give her some company? To stand in front of that wall so she could look at them? To just be around so she could read their minds like Davey does mine and not be lonely?"

He continued his explorations until he entered a corridor at the other end of which he could see Dave squatted on the floor with his back to a

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bulkhead, his eyes fixed on something out of sight.

"I've gone clean around the ship," he muttered. "Think I'll try some other level. Maybe I can get an overall picture of the layout of the ship, if nothing else."

He turned back to the last open tube vertical with the floor. Gradually as he continued, intent now only on learning the general details of layout of the ship, he built up a picture.

There were cylindrical tubes sticking out from the prison capsule and bringing up against the inner surface of the outer shell. These tubes were of neutron matter joined solidly to the capsule itself.

"Probably the drive tubes carrying the forces that propel the ship," he said aloud. "This outer part I'm in is just a sort of excess baggage, in a way, tacked on for those original travelers that went along with her."

Finally he had finished his exploration.

"Not a dang thing in the whole ship," he said. "Not even an engraving or trade mark stamped in metal to give an idea of the kind of letters they had in their alphabet. Not a statue. It's almost like they didn't want to leave the slightest trace out here. I'm even beginning to have doubts that a cyclotron could touch that neutron matter."

HE RETURNED to the airlock. Dave's spacesuit was still there so he went down the corridor to where Dave was. Dave looked up.

"Find anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing," Zaney said. "And I suppose Bea-Anna didn't pay any attention to you today either."

"No," Dave said. "I wish I knew why. If I only knew why I'd feel better about it."

"Why don't you get your mind off her?" Zaney said. "Get interested in something. You don't have to sit here every day. When she gets around to talking to you she can do so just as easily if you aren't right here." He grinned slyly, adding, "If I know women that'd make her come around quick enough, if you started losing interest and began to ignore her."

Dave shook his head, utter misery appearing on his face.

"This isn't something to play around with," he said. "I don't think you know what real love is."

"Maybe Bea-Anna doesn't either," Zaney said.

"This is something beyond ordinary experience," Dave went on. "She reached down into the very roots of my mind and changed things around. I've been doing a lot of thinking while I sit here day after day. I'm not like other people any more. I know you don't like it because I can read your thoughts. How do you think another girl would feel about that? Only someone like Bea-Anna, to whom mind reading is also something normal, wouldn't resent it."

"Well," Zaney said, "evidently she can cut you off from her thoughts. I don't know how to do that. Wish I could. But dang it, I wish you'd stop mooning over her. For all you know she's decided she doesn't want anything to do with you, and is just waiting for you to die of old age so she can be rid of you. A woman'd do a thing like that if she wanted to and think it was O.K.. And a woman a million or so years old, with millions of years ahead of her, would think nothing of forty or fifty years, the time it would take you to die of old age. After all, she let these other people that started out with her die."

"What other people?" Dave asked.

"The ones that used the furniture in this outer part of the ship," Zaney said. "It's a big place. I've been all

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over it now. There must have been hundreds, maybe thousands of people here at one time. What became of them? They died off, that's what. And Bea-Anna didn't lift a finger. Maybe she ignored them like she does you."

"I don't believe that," Dave said slowly, his eyes going to the opaque wall behind which Bea-Anna rested, unseen and silent.

"I'M GOING to need your help, Davey," Zaney said at breakfast three weeks later.

"You've got a plan for breaking down that wall?" Dave asked eagerly.

"I'm not sure–it'll work," Zaney said. "I'm going to build a linear proton accelerator."

"Where'll you get the protons?" Dave asked.

"From Hydrogen," Zaney said. "We'll get the Hydrogen from water. The proton generator will be a simple enough thing. Just an ionization device with fields that pull the protons out in one direction and the electrons in another. The protons will go into the accelerator. They'll come out of it at speeds around a hundred thousand miles a second and crash into that neutron matter. Some of them should hit atoms of that stuff just right and break it up."

"You mean atomic disintegration?" Dave asked.

"Yeah," Zaney said.

"What'll happen then?" Dave asked.

Zaney frowned. "I don't know," he said. "Neutron matter should be a sucker for bombardment. But whether the nuclear binding forces would hold it together or not I don't know. No way of finding out except to try it."

"But what if a chain reaction starts up?" Dave said.

"If that happens Lark Planetoid will just be a Nova in the heavens for a second or two if anybody on Earth or Mars happens to be looking," Zaney shrugged.

"Then we can't do it!" Dave said. "I won't stand for anything that might risk Bea-Anna's life."

"If she don't like it let her say something then," Zaney said. "She probably knows what'll happen. If she doesn't say anything I'll know it will either work or not do anything. She wouldn't remain silent while I do something that would destroy her."

"She may be asleep," Dave said. "I won't run the risk. You're not going to do it."

"Yes I am," Zaney said quietly.

"No you're not," Dave said. "And don't try anything. I can read your plans in your mind before you try anything. If you don't behave I'll have to lock you up."

"What's come over you, Davey?" Zaney said. "A month ago you saw no objection to bombarding that shell with protons. It's the only way. Ordinary mater is like a rarefied gas to cut through. It would be like trying to saw a board by blowing on it. Ordinary matter is like a rarified gas to heavy matter. What do you want to do? Just go sit in front of that wall every day for the rest of your life?"

"I don't know what I want to do," Dave said, torn by emotion. "All I know is that I don't want to do anything that might endanger Bea-Anna's life."

"Well she certainly has done plenty to endanger our lives," Zaney said. "Damn women. More I see of them the more I hate them."

"That's it," Dave said, laying down his fork. "I should have seen it before. You hate her. You know what will happen. You'll start a chain reaction. You used to be a scientist. You know what will happen. You'll kill her to get even with all the things you've imagined women have done against you."

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"You're getting a little space-wacky," Zaney said. "Snap out of it. Sitting in front of that blank wall everyday is unhealthy."

"So now you accuse me of going crazy," Dave said. "Did it ever occur to you that that's the first sign of insanity, accusing others of being crazy?"

"Calm down, Davey," Zaney soothed. "We're both a little off our course."

"I'm sorry, Zaney," Dave said abruptly. "I'm going to have to lock you up. I can't trust you any more."

"Why not let me just take all the fuel I can load into that S.P. lifeboat and try to make it back to the Solar System?" Zaney said. "Then I'll be out of your hair permanently."

"No," Dave said, shaking his head. "I can read your thoughts, remember. You'd try to turn the tables on me. You're convinced I'm crazy, and should be locked up. I can't trust you."

He was coming around the table toward Zaney, slowly, his fingers working.

Zaney suddenly leaped up, lashing out with his fist; but Dave had moved at the same instant, easily avoiding the fist.

"You forget I can read your mind and know what you're going to do before you do it," he said grimly. "You're an old man. I don't want to have to hurt you. Just give up peacefully so I can lock you up. I'll take care of you. You don't have to be afraid."

"You may be able to read my mind, Davey," Zaney said, "but you're soft. I'm going to wear you down. When you get tired it won't do you any good to read minds."

He picked up a plate and threw it at Dave's head. Dave ducked even as he threw it. As it left his hand he picked up another and threw it.

"All right, Zaney," Dave said grimly, "You're asking for it. You won't give in so I'll have to hurt you."

He doubled his fists. Zaney darted to the electric range and picked up a skillet and threw it, hot grease spattering in the air.

Some of the hot grease splashed on Dave's neck. He wiped at it with his hand. Instantly Zaney stepped in and brought his fist against Dave's jaw with everything he had. Dave's eyes glazed over for a second. He staggered back.

Zaney followed him, fist ready for a clean opening. It came. His fist landed. Dave flew backward, his head coming up agaisnt the bulkhead sickeningly. He dropped to the floor unconscious.

Breathing hard, Zaney dragged him from the kitchen along a corridor to one of the staterooms. He dumped him inside, took the key out of the door and locked the door on the outside.

He stood there looking at the cream panel of the door, breathing hard, a look of suffering in his eyes.

"Sorry, Davey," he said. "So damn sorry. But somewhere in your mind you know I had to do it."

"DAMN WOMAN," Zaney said cheerfully.

He stepped back to view the almost finished cloud chamber admiringly.

"Nice bit of brazing, Zaney," he complimented himself.

He shut off the torch and hung it over the acetylene tank, then went over to the lathe that was turning out a brass pipe elbow from a template, the movements of the cutting tool and the gleaming piece of metal changing dizzily.

"Of course, in a way, she's all right," he said conversationally to himself. "I can't blame her for being leery of Dave. A nice guy, but he cracks up. If she went into the depths

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of his mind maybe she knew he would. The more I think of it the more I think his getting her trajectory back there on the Space Patrol flagship was a fluke. A slip on her part."

The cutting tool was running free now. He stopped the lathe and took the finished elbow out of the clamps.

"Nice job," he said to the lathe. "Feel in the mood to do another? O.K.."

He went to the pile of material he had laid out and got another brass blank to clamp in the lathe stock.

"Do as nicely on this and I'll let you rest a while," he said, patting the lathe affectionately.

He took the finished elbow over to the cloud chamber assembly, put it in place, and lit the brazing torch again.

"I could maybe fuel up that life boat and leave you in peace, Bea-Anna," he said, pulling his goggles down off his forehead, "but I've gotten so interested in making this proton accelerator that I'm going to finish it before I make up my mind about anything. Maybe by then Davey will have gotten interested in those books I put in his room. Right now all he's concerned about is my going ahead with what he thinks is revenge on you." He chuckled knowingly. "Oh you can't kid me. You're a woman. I know you've got your mental ears glued on every word I say or think. You wouldn't miss anything for the world. So I'll just go ahead talking to myself knowing you're listening. Me, I'm different than Davey. I've learned how to get along with myself. I spent too many years prospecting all alone not to learn how or go mad. And I guess if I was inclined to go crazy I would have done so when my wife played me for a sucker."

He bent over and heated a spot where the elbow and a pipe fitted together.

"Maybe when I get this job done I'll make something else," he said. "Actually I couldn't pick a better setup to spend my life puttering around in. I might even try some of those experiments I used to dream of doing when I had the time and money to build my own research laboratory."

He frowned in concentration as he started to deftly manipulate the flowing bronze around the joint, flowing it into the crack to make a neat, gas tight joint.

"I s'pose you know the answers to all the problems of science, Bea-Anna," he went on. "You probably smile at the experiments I want to try. I'm probably just a little bug running around in its own stupidity to you. But I'll bet you wore diapers yourself once. That's one thing about life. We all started out even at the beginning. Or don't you want to think about that?"

He chuckled.

Humming softly to himself he chased the puddle of molten metal around the joint and smoothed it off. Shutting off the torch he surveyed his handiwork.

"Bet you couldn't have done a bit better, Bea-Anna," he said. "Or do you just run to brains?"

He chuckled to himself again and went to the lathe.

"You're doing all right, sonny," he said, patting it. "You and I understand each other. No wild ideas or standoffishness. Machines are the nicest people to associate with."

He chuckled again and glanced at his watch.

"Time to fix Davey some lunch," he said.

"YEP, SKILLET," Zaney said, "in all my sixty-two years I've never seen a better skillet than you."

He swished the scrambled eggs around with a deft movement and slid them into the plate on the tray.

"Yep," he said, "a real aristocrat

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among skillets for an aristocrat among spaceships."

He set the pan down on the electric range. Picking up the tray he balanced it expertly on the palm of his left hand, pushing open the door to the corridor.

"Soup's on, Davey," he called cheerfully, his voice echoing along the corridor. "Nice and hot."

He began whistling on an off key as he scuffed along, balancing the tray over his head.

He came to the door. His whistling stopped in the middle of a note.

The door panel had been torn out, and was hanging by one corner. It was rocking idly in the slight breeze produced by the ventilation system.

Pasted to the wall with scotch tape beside the doorframe was a sheet of paper with writing on it. Zaney slowly lowered the tray and held it with both hands while he approached the piece of paper to read it.

"Zaney," it read, "I'll give you forty-eight hours to fuel up the S.P. lifeboat and blast off from Lark Planetoid. If you aren't gone by then I'll kill you. And I can always read your mind and know where you are, while you can never know where I will be." It wasn't signed.

His shoulders sagged. He licked his lips nervously.

"I guess you mean it, Davey," he said sadly. "Can't say that I blame you. Don't know what got into me to lock you up. I should have been able to think of a better way to handle the situation than that." He lifted his head and looked at the note on the wall again. His shoulders squared. "But I ain't going. You can kill me if you want to, but I'm not going to leave. We started out together and I'm sticking to the end. So if you're going to kill me don't wait forty-eight hours. Do it right away."

He set the tray on the floor directly under the note, then shuffled down the corridor to prepare his own meal. He had taken no more than twenty steps when there was a deafening report that exploded an instant after a shrill whine. A small puncture appeared in the insulation along the wall ten feet ahead, with a lazy puff of white powder rising out of it.

"That's a warning that I mean what I say!" he heard Dave shout from some distance behind him.

He stopped and turned slowly. Dave's head and shoulders were thrust through the broken panel of the door.

"I kind of thought you were in there, Davey," Zaney said mildly. "I'm not going to change my mind. Shoot me now if you want to. Get it over with."

"Forty-eight hours, Zaney," Dave said grimly. "No more no less."

"I'll be ready to meet my Maker, Davey," Zaney said.

He turned his back and continued on toward the kitchen. The clatter of a dish followed by a muttered curse brought a half smile to his lips under his beard. At least Dave was eating the meal he had prepared for him!

"Skillet," he said as he broke an egg into the copper and tin skillet back in the kitchen, "you've been a nice friend to me." He sniffed loudly and wiped his sleeve across his nose.

He ate his lunch in silence. After he finished he went back along the corridor and retrieved Dave's dirty dishes to wash with the rest.

Once while he was washing the dishes he turned suddenly toward the door, sensing eyes on him. The door was just swinging closed. He turned back to his task with a tired sigh.

During the afternoon he divided his time between feeding blank stock to the lathe and filling page after page with detailed drawings and explanations for the completion of the linear proton accelerator.

When he delivered Dave's dinner

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tray at the door to what had been his prison the pages of notes and drawings were also on the tray with a terse note that read: Save these just in case you ever want to complete the only thing my science knows of that might free Bea-Anna.

The notes were gone and the dishes empty when he came back for them after finishing his own dinner.

"MIGHT AS well go to my room and get some sleep," Zaney mumbled, shutting off the water purifyer and putting the dishes away where they belonged.

There was no need of shutting off the lights. The atom power plant of the ship would run for centuries. He left the kitchen and crossed the corridor to the room he had fixed up for his own.

"No use locking my door," he said. "If Dave wants to go back on his word and kill me he couldn't pick a better time to do it than when I'm asleep."

He undressed and took a hot shower. Turning off the lights, he stretched out on his bunk.

From far away came the silent hum of the ship's power plant, so inaudible that its whisper was barely discernible.

He lay with his eyes open. Gradually as they adjusted the room appeared in ghostly outline, a phenomenon all space travelers become accustomed to, caused by ultra-violet radiation exciting random molecules of the air and causing them to emit visible quanta.

"Damn woman," he said after a long silence. "But I don't blame you, Bea-Anna. Guess it's the spinster in you, or maybe you're so far advanced over Davey philosophically that his behavior seems like that of an obnoxious puppy to you. I can understand you maybe better than most. I've been alone a long time myself. Like it. Every time I strike a paying meteor and go on a binge in some spaceport, I swear never again. Then after I've been out in space alone for a long time I get lonely and say, 'Maybe I was wrong. Maybe people aren't as bad as I remember them.' So I go back and do it all over. I'll bet that's what you do yourself. Then you go to some star system and find guys like Davey and Rek Barker, and me. And you shake them off by letting them die of old age."

He sighed loudly.

"You know, though, Bea-Anna," he went on sleepily, "I kinda like you. I sort of wish I could maybe get acquainted with you before Davey shoots me day after tomorrow. But with him being able to read my mind I guess I wouldn't. I don't know why, except that it wouldn't mean quite the same with him...listenin'..."

His soft snores drifted over the gloom. He did not stir when the door opened softly and Dave stood silhouetted against the lights in the corridor, gun in hand, his breathing a rasping animal sound in the darkness.

"I DON'T LIKE this. I'm dreaming, but I don't like it. I'm going to wake up." Zaney mumbled.

"No!" a disembodied voice whispered. "You aren't going to wake up. You're going to stay asleep. And you're going to open that door."

"The heck I am," Zaney said. He drew back in fear.

It was just an ordinary door, innocent looking. He couldn't remember ever having seen it before, nor anything on the other side of it, yet he drew back from it, afraid.

"There's no reason for you to be afraid," the voice said. "When you open that door you will be glad you did."

"No!" Zaney protested. He squirmed in his sleep, trying to waken and unable to do so. "No!"

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The door seemed to come nearer to him, blocking out everything else. Its knob gleamed sinisterly from some unseen source of illumination. He saw his hand creeping toward that knob and drew it back with a whimper of fear. The door receded a little.

"There *was* a time when it was open," the disembodied voice said sadly. "But something closed it? What was it?"

"I closed it," Zaney whispered. "I don't remember it, but I closed it!"

"Yes, you closed it," the voice said. "You closed it because there was something in there you were afraid of. But that isn't in there any more. It's gone. You can open the door!"

"No!" Zaney whimpered.

"But you must," the voice whispered commandingly. "*I* am in there. Not just the other side of the door, but that is the way to come to me. You must open that door *first!*"

"No, Bea-Anna, no!" Zaney said. And as he heard himself utter her name he knew it was she who was talking to him. He wakened abruptly.

He tried to rise to a sitting position on his bunk. A strange, drugged lethargy possessed him.

"You must go back to sleep," her voice whispered in his mind. "Sleep. Close your eyes."

"Yes, Bea-Anna," his lips formed the words silently. He let his eyes close.

Abruptly he became aware that it had been some time since he had fallen asleep again, and now he was standing before the door again. There was no disembodied voice.

Of his own volition he was advancing slowly toward that door, reaching out to grasp its glistening knob. His fingers closed about it, twisted.

Then suddenly he released the knob and drew back.

"No!" he screamed. "I'm afraid!"

The door retreated from him. As the distance increased he felt a desire to return to the door possess him. He ran toward it, and it still retreated. He increased his pace. The door grew smaller and more remote.

Then suddenly he was standing before it again.

"Open it," Bea-Anna's voice said.

The fear was gone. He stepped forward calmly and reached out. He saw his hand close about the knob, twist it—and the door was swinging open.

"The little brat. If he was my kid I'd tan his hide good." It was a shrewish female voice that faded even as it spoke.

"...if he only knew about his mother, but they're keeping it from him that she died..."

"...Johny Johny JOHNY!... but mommy's dead. I know she's..."

"How did that kid find out his ma's dead? Who told him? He ain't no mind reader. Somebody told him..."

Faint whispers of disembodied memory coming through the open door...then suddenly:

"I could kill him right now, but dammit I can't. He's got to leave. Yes I can. I'm going to kill him when the forty-eight hours are up. I'm going to." It was Davey's voice. Not his real voice but his mental voice!

Its crystal clarity snapped Zaney's eyes open. He lifted his head. The door to his room was closing slowly, cutting off the light from the corridor.

It stopped closing for a pregnant instant, then slammed with no pretense of caution. The sound of running footsteps came from the other side.

"He woke up!" Davey's mental voice said angrily. "Now he'll lock his door."

"No, Davey," Zaney said. "Now I won't have to. You see, we're equal now. I can read your thoughts too."

He caught the startled mental exclamation as Dave received his thought. The swift surmise that Bea-Anna had done this thing. The anger and frustration. The final settlement

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into despondency and gloom.

"BEA-ANNA doesn't love me," Dave's despairing thought came.

Zaney paused in his stirring of the hotcake batter, a troubled light in his eyes.

"I wouldn't say that, Davey," he said aloud conversationally although he knew that Dave was at the far end of the ship, almost five hundred yards away. "She just wanted to give me an equal chance with you. After all, if you murder me she won't like it."

"I'm still going to kill you if you haven't gone by tomorrow morning, Zaney," Dave's thought came grimly. "Now that you can read my thoughts things are even more intolerable than before."

"For me too, Davey," Zaney said. "But how can you kill me now that I can know what your plans are and where you are all the time?"

"You have to sleep," Dave's thought came. "I'm younger than you. I can stay awake longer. When you go to sleep I'll kill you."

"How about tonight?" Zaney asked. "Will you kill me if I sleep tonight?"

"Unless you load the Space Patrol lifeboat with fuel today and take off from Lark Planetoid, yes," Dave's thought came.

"I suppose I could leave," Zaney said, "but I'm not going to. In fact, I couldn't leave you here out of your mind, alone on a planetoid heading out into interstellar space, the way you are. If you were all right you might still go space-wacky, and you're that already. If I left you in the condition you're in it would haunt me the rest of my life. I'm staying."

"That's final?" Dave telepathed.

"Yes," Zaney said with finality.

"Then I'm coming after you now, Zaney," Dave's thought sounded. "From this moment I'm after you, and when I see you I'll shoot to kill."

Zaney sensed the change of impressions in Dave's mind and knew he was even now coming toward this end of the ship, gun out, intent on killing him.

He glanced about the kitchen hastily. There was no way of locking the doors. It would be foolish to stay here. His own gun was in his room. He didn't intend to kill Davey even in self defense, but he might as well have his gun.

He set the bowl of hotcake batter on the table and hurried from the kitchen. In two minutes he had his gun and his spacesuit on. Dave was already very close. He hurried out into the corridor and made his way to the airlock in the foreaxis of the ship.

There was a shot. Something plopped and whined angrily just as he closed the inner hatch. It came to rest at his feet, a shapeless piece of metal.

The outer door swung open. With a twisted smile Zaney picked up the spent bullet and stepped out. When the outer hatch swung shut he held the bullet so that it blocked it open just enough to prevent a perfect air-tight seal.

"Now you'll have to use the airlock at the other end of the ship, Davey," he said. "This one won't work."

"You could beat me there and fix that one too, bottling me up in the ship!" Dave's thought came in an instantaneous rush.

"Telepathy has its advantages, Davey," Zaney said. "I'm glad you thought of that. I'll do it!"

He had already shoved out from the giant ship, using his small drive rockets to propel himself along the shell.

He reached the stern of the ship, landed on the platform, and pressed the admittance button imbedded in the shell.

Dave had not attempted to beat him. He was already in the control room shutting off the longitudinal spin motors and braking the inner part of the ship to a halt so that he could

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use the airlocks ordinarily used when the ship had landed.

"There's no way of jamming them!" Dave's thought came triumphantly. "I can pick any one of half a dozen and you can't know which one by reading my mind. While you're jamming one I can get to another."

"That's true," Zaney admitted. "It's too bad I can't bottle you up in this ship. It's nice and big, and you could be comfortable until you recovered your senses."

"Recovered my senses?" Dave telepathed. "Listen you crazy space bum. You went wacky before I was born and never recovered. You don't even have sense enough to know that three's a crowd. Why do you suppose Bea-Anna won't open up? It's because you're here too. If you'd have sense enough to leave she and I could get together. Why do you suppose Bill Hanes declined to come along? He knew that he'd be excess baggage! You should have had sense enough to drop out too!"

"Is that true, Davey?" Zaney said. "You know, I never thought of that before. Why didn't you tell me then?" Dave's words filled him with a sense of horror at himself. "Damn, Dave. I'll get out right now. I can see it all now. What a zaney old fool I've been! You don't have to go gunning for me any more and have a murder on your hands. I'm going to start loading fuel on that ship as fast as I can."

"Get at it then," Dave's mental voice came curtly. "The sooner you get out the better."

"I SURE wish that wasn't true, what Davey told me. I would have liked to get acquainted with Bea-Anna. She's the first female I ever thought I could like. Of course I'm too old for her, but it would have been nice being a sort of father to Dave and Bea-Anna here in our own little world. But he's right..."

Zaney tapped against the two hundred gallon drum. It didn't ring quite empty yet. He went over to the orienter of the S. P. lifeboat. Here in the hole in the surface of Lark Planetoid where it perched ready for flight the orienter couldn't keep bearings on the Sun, Polaris, and Sirius; but its delicately adjusted parts could still do a reasonably accurate job of orientation by dead reckoning.

Zaney fed the data into the autopilot, adjusting other knobs to give readings of full fuel tanks, and destination. His eyes went to the small rectangle of glass behind which the time it would take to return to the vicinity of Mars and the Earth would flash.

A red blot flashed in the glass and died out. That blot signified the ship couldn't reach its destination with the data given and by the ideal method. Zaney gulped. He knew the autopilot was searching now. The processes of mathematical integration incorporated into it were now working on finding the most ideal answer.

Suddenly numbers were in the glass. Zaney stared at them with growing dismay.

"Twenty-two years and six months!" he whispered. "That means it'll take so much fuel to decelerate and get a positive velocity toward the solar system that I'll have to coast most of the way. I'd die of old age before I could get there!"

Dave's telepathed voice formed in his mind.

"You can carry extra tanks of fuel in the cabin," it said, "and also any number of them outside the ship. With Lark Planetoid's thousandth of a gravity pull it's just like starting out in empty space."

"Yes," Zaney said uneasily, "you're right. I can do that."

He forced himself to remain contrite. It was an effort. He thrust from

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his thoughts the little voices of logic that tried to whisper that Dave had been glad enough for him to come along when he thought they'd have to fight most of Rek Barker's men, the knowledge that Dave had been almost willing not to come, and that it had been his own knocking out of Major Tryon that had made it possible. He drowned those little whispers with the stronger logic that Dave was right, three made a crowd. If positions were reversed and Bea-Anna was in love with him instead of Dave it wouldn't be the same having Dave around as it would be alone with her.

"Sometimes injustice is a necessary evil," he said.

He went to the emptying two hundred gallon drum and rapped his knuckles against it. It rang hollow.

"This is hard work," he said, "carting these drums back and forth through the pipestem. Seems to me Rek Barker would have had sense enough to build a fuel dump here when he cut this secret base out of the rock." His face lit up with surprise at the thought. "He must have!"

He left things the way they were and went outside the ship. He stopped in his tracks. The fuel line was in plain sight. He could even remember stepping carefully over it, now that he saw it.

He followed it to where it entered a concrete tunnel. Inside was a fairly large underground storeroom with fuel storage cylinders stacked up.

There were also huge piles of boxed goods, bins of pipe parts and valves, coils of flexible chrome hose, and everything that could possibly be needed for the job of loading the S. P. lifeboat with enough fuel to cut the journey back to the solar system and Mars or Earth to—

"Maybe to ten years," Zaney muttered.

The defiant thoughts bubbled against the surface of consciousness without breaking through.

He plunged into the work of transporting the huge cylinders to the ship and lashing them in place along the hull with thin steel cables run through U hooks welded to the plates. The ship's inner tanks were quickly filling through flexible hosing connected to the pipe that led out under the ship from other tanks.

"I wish you'd change your mind, Davey," he said suddenly. "Bea-Anna is the only female I ever really wanted to meet. I hate going away like this without ever meeting her."

"That's the reason you have to go, Zaney," Dave's thought came. Accompanying it was a flood of half formed thoughts that Dave didn't want to express.

An uneasy feeling rose in Zaney. He tried to sluff it off, but it kept returning. He knew the borderline between sanity and insanity was a very subtle one. Often it was impossible to tell the difference except by the outcome, or by viewing an over-all pattern of thought and action.

"One thing I know," he muttered. "If I leave Lark Planetoid I won't be able to find it again."

A picture rose in his mind against his will. A picture of Dave, completely irrational, unable to follow consistently any plan of action, unkempt, his mind disintegrated into a thousand conflicting patterns at the mercy of the vagaries of unbridled emotions, gradually degenerating until he became a wild animal, alone in this hollow world, batting his head against the impenetrable wall of Bea-Anna's silence. A silence more certain and more permanent because she would be afraid to even maintain contact with the seeds of madness.

"I can't leave if that's what will happen!" he groaned. "And yet, will it? Or is my own mind conjuring up excuses to hold me here?"

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THE SHIP was completely refueled now. Zaney unfastened the flexible chrome hosing from the intake on the ship, and coiled it up and put it away in the storage cave.

As he was leaving his eyes caught the lettering on the side of a small long wooden box. Turnbuckle Jacks, it read.

A plan formed in his mind full blown. Without waiting to think he put the plan into action. An iron bar broke the box open. He grunted in satisfaction as he saw that the turnbuckled jacks were heavy duty ones with extensions.

Already Dave had read his plan and was speeding toward the pipestem tunnel to prevent it from being carried out.

Zaney turned away from the turnbuckle jacks and quickly picked out one of the long cylinders that had been emptied into the ship's fuel tanks. Its mass was over a thousand pounds, but in the weak gravity of Lark Planetoid he could lift it with one hand. Twenty feet long and two feet in diameter, built to withstand thousands of pounds pressure, it would stop any bullet from an automatic.

He carried it out of the storage cave to the entrance to the pipestem tunnel leading down into the planetoid. For a distance of several hundred feet it went without hindrance. Then it began to scrape the sides. It stopped and refused to go further. There was space around it, but none large enough for a human body in a spacesuit to squeeze past.

Trembling with urgency Zaney returned to the storage cave and came back with one of the turnbuckle jacks. In a few moments it was pressed rigidly against opposite sides of the tunnel, its middle touching the end of the fuel cylinder. It was an effective blockade that couldn't possibly be budged from the other side.

"Now, Davey," Zaney said shakily but triumphantly, "I can stay without fear of being killed in my sleep. I'll leave if and when I know you're going to be all right and not before, so you might as well start cooling down and being your old self. The quicker you do the quicker I'll go."

He winced at the flood of wild invective flooding into his mind from Dave's. Along with it was something that convinced him he had done right. It was a realization within Dave's own mind that he was incapable of getting a grip on himself.

"I'll give you no more mercy," Dave telepathed after his anger had cooled off a little. "Your game can work both ways. First I'm going to block the inner end of the pipestem the way you've done at your end. Then I'm coming around in the lifeboat of one of the ships and drop a bomb on you."

A wave of dismay swept over Zaney. He conquered it with an effort. Mild anger replaced it.

"Your plan is an admission that you know you're space-wacky, Davey," he said. "For your own good give yourself up to me and let me take you home where you can get treatments to snap you out of it."

"Look who's talking," Dave jeered. "It'll be an act of mercy to kill you and put you out of your misery. And that's just what I'm going to do. If you take off and try to escape I'm going after you."

"Maybe that's what Bea-Anna is waiting for," Zaney said. "The minute you take off she'll accelerate Lark Planetoid so fast you'll be lost in the void."

"Damn Bea-Anna!" Dave said. "I'm getting tired of her silence and underhandedness in making you able to read my thoughts. When I get you out of the way I'm opening that can she's sealed up in and show her the man's the boss."

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"How?" Zaney mocked.

"I'll find a way," Dave said grimly. He was hurrying back down the pipestem to build his own blockade before Zaney could possibly prevent him.

Zaney turned slowly away from his blockade and started back up to the S.P. lifeboat. He was trembling violently now.

He muttered through chattering teeth, "What am I shaking for? I'm not that much of a coward!" He gave an uneasy laugh. He knew it wasn't fear. It was something in his subconscious. He had no slightest idea of what it might be, yet he shied instinctively away from it.

Suddenly something broke through into consciousness. It was a loneliness, a greater loneliness than he had ever before experienced. It was part of the cause of his trembling, but only a part.

"Gosh, I didn't know I could miss being friendly with Dave that much!" he said thinly.

With the audible expression of the thought he realized it wasn't the truth. The truth was insane. Incredible.

The intense loneliness took a direction, reaching out with an intense yearning—toward Bea-Anna! His trembling increased to the point where he couldn't command his muscles. He came to a stop, not even breathing.

The full realization of the truth flooded into his mind. He loved Bea-Anna, had loved her ever since he received her first telepathed call for help—how many lifetimes had he lived since then? Every atom of his being yearned for her, reached out impotently toward her.

"But dammit!" he whimpered. "I'm an old man! I'm sevent—"

The knowledge that she was thousands if not millions of years old struck him.

"But she's immortal," he whispered "Physically she's young. Physically I'm older than she. Almost before she can take her next breath I'll be in my grave." He groaned in misery. "But I love her," he whispered.

"SO NOW the mask of hypocrisy is off," Dave's thought came bitterly. "All your pretense that you were so concerned about me and my welfare! The truth of the matter all along was that you wanted Bea-Anna for yourself."

"Damn you, Davey," Zaney said. "You have a way of making things that aren't true sound like they are. I didn't even know I was in love with her." He wanted the thought to stop there, but it completed itself. "And it soils that love just for a space-wacky mind like yours to know of its existence."

"Maybe I am insane," Dave's mental voice said. "Sure. But you're the one that drove me insane. Deliberately. When I've killed you I can get a grip on myself. Not before."

"I hate to say this, Davey," Zaney said, "but you know as well as I do that space madness can't cure itself. It takes months or years of competent help to recover. Help you can't get here."

"For your information, Zaney," Dave said, "I'm not crazy. Just as you came along because subconsciously you were in love with Bea-Anna all the time, so, subconsciously, I sensed that and knew, also subconsciously, that so long as you stayed here you were a threat to mine and Bea-Anna's happiness. I realize that now just as you know now that you love Bea-Anna too. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

"Yes," Zaney said.

"And you can't leave now and turn your back on the one you love. Right?"

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"I—I don't know," Zaney said. "If I knew she loved you, and her happiness depended on my leaving, I think I could leave."

"You're a liar," Dave said. "That's why I can't let you leave now. I have to kill you instead. I can't leave anyone alive that might someday disrupt my happiness—and Bea-Anna's. I'm coming after you."

"Then I'll have to shoot you down, Davey," Zaney said calmly. "This S.P. lifeboat is also equipped for minor combat duty. None of the lifeboats of those passenger and freight ships are."

A string of invectives came as Dave realized what Zaney had said was true.

"This place is hard to find," Zaney continued. "I can see you coming before you can locate my position on the surface, and blow you out of the sky. By the same token you couldn't send robombs without knowing my exact location, and even if you could I would stand a good chance of hitting them. The only thing that can avoid projectiles from an autocannon is something on a nonsense course."

Dave's mental groan answered this logic.

"I can stay here indefinitely, Davey," Zaney went on. "I can wait until you kill yourself with madness. I don't know anything else I can do."

It was a problem. Zaney caught Dave's occasional thought as he brooded over it. He brooded over it himself. The ideal solution, he knew, would be to capture Davey, give him some knockout drops to put him to sleep for twenty-four hours, put him in the S.P. lifeboat and set the autopilot to blast off. When Davey woke up the planetoid would be out of sight in the void. He would be forced to continue on into the Solar System where he would be picked up.

But how capture Davey? Zaney knew that if he made his way around the planetoid to the two mile wide opening Davey could see him coming and knock him off with the high-powered guns there. The rim of that opening bristled with guns Rek Barker and his men had placed there to fight off attack from space or by land.

"It's a stalemate," he groaned. "And it's intolerable."

"A stalemate, yes," Dave's mental voice answered. "As intolerable for me as for you. There's only one way to resolve it. That is, if you're not a coward. I'll start out from the rim of the opening over on this side, on foot. At the same time you have to start out from where you are. We'll meet half way and fight it out on foot with guns."

"That would force me to kill you, Davey," Zaney said. "If I punctured your suit out in the vacuum you'd die."

"It's the only way, Zaney," Dave said. "Are you game?" The tone of his telepathed challenge was mocking.

"There doesn't seem to be any other way, Davey," Zaney said regretfully. "I'm forced to take you up on it. I don't want to kill you, but it looks like I'll have to."

"If you can!" Dave said, jeering.

ZANEY pulled himself up the side of the S.P. lifeboat until he reached its nose. From there he sprung the forty feet to the edge of the hole, lighting on his feet with all the skill of one who has spent years climbing over gravityless rocks in the interplanetary belts.

He looked back down at the ship, debating whether he should take some vital part of its controls, disabling it.

"No," he decided aloud. "If Davey wants to take it and leave Lark Planetoid it's O.K. by me. I have a hunch the minute he did Bea-Anna would

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make sure he couldn't catch up with it again."

He turned the other way and looked out over the uninviting landscape. Here and there was a white patch where gases had formed a hoarfrost. Underfoot the rock surface was jagged and dangerous. The origin of Lark Planetoid was obvious to anyone looking at its surface. It was pure lava, thrown off in a molten condition in some cosmic upheaval, gases in it forming a leavening as soon as the force of gravity vanished, forming bubbles throughout the mass as it congealed. In some places these unbroken bubbles formed ovoid domes of treacherous footing, liable to shatter and send razor sharp fragments in all directions. In other places they had already broken, leaving sharp-edged miniature moon craters that could cut through the legs of a spacesuit easily.

The hollow interior was also easily explained. At one time when the mass was still molten it had been filled. In the process of cooling, the outer few miles had solidified, shrinking, exerting greater and greater pressure on the still molten interior, until finally that crust had given way at its weakest point. At once the fluid interior had rushed out through the opening, the gases throughout the mixture expanding rapidly, completing the ejection of fluid lava until there was nothing left but extremely fragile bubbles that shattered completely when struck by the first inevitable bit of stone that fell through the two mile wide hole, leaving the center completely hollow.

Zaney looked out across the alien landscape, his face creased in grim lines. He was sensing to the full the drama and horror of what lay ahead. Two men in spacesuits, able to read the thoughts in each other's mind as soon as they formed, advancing toward each other across this barren landscape of stone on an airless almost gravityless world, each intent on killing the other. In a few hours one would die. Perhaps it would be him. The thought of that possibility brought a constriction to his throat muscles.

He looked up into the black, star-studded sky. His experienced eye found the sun, a bright star no larger than Sirius. He looked back at the cold jagged landscape, illuminated only by the light of those stars.

And sensed Dave's waiting on the other side of the globe for him to start.

The first few hours would be ticklish wary hours, as each searched the other's mind for possible treachery, a quick race back to get a spaceship in which to hunt down the other. Gradually as this possibility grew remote would come the open advance without fear of either treachery or of meeting each other. Then would come the slowing down as they neared each other for final combat.

Zaney took his first step, an easy, directed push that sent him in a slow arc over a distance of twenty feet while his eyes studied the spot where he would land for signs of possible danger.

HE CAME very close to ripping his spacesuit on a jagged outcropping.

"Damn," he muttered. "I'll have to be careful or this crazy fight'll end before it starts."

He made his next jump carry him higher and not so far forward so that he could come down straighter and not skim so close to the hazardous terrain.

"So you're having the same trouble, eh, Davey?" he said, chuckling at the incoming thoughts.

To one side, a hundred yards away, there was a sudden explosion that sent

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flat slate-like segments of rock flying in every direction. One of them narrowly missed Zaney.

"Either an exploding bubble or that was a strike by a meteor!" he muttered. "That's another hazard to this course. Golf! And par for the course is a hole in one. Ever play golf, Davey? I used to play it pretty good in my younger days."

"Shut up," Dave's thought came. With it came the host of sensations that told of his progress over the surface.

"You know, Davey," Zaney said after an hour of relative silence and concentration on going forward, "the one of us that sees the other first will have an advantage. Mind reading won't take away from that because neither of us is familiar with the landscape enough to locate the other by knowledge of his surroundings."

"What's over your head, Zaney?" Dave asked. "We don't want to miss each other."

"That's right," Zaney said. "The big dipper is up ahead of me. It should be the same with you if we're heading toward each other."

"It is," Dave said, "and we can't lie to each other on that."

"That's right," Zaney said. "That's the bad thing about reading each other's thoughts. We can't lie to each other." He chuckled. "Think what that'd do to civilization if everybody was able to read minds. Nobody could lie and get away with it."

"There'd be more murders," Dave said.

"Pretty soon there'd only be honest people left alive," Zaney said.

"Yeah?" was Dave's dry comment.

THE HOURS passed slowly. Both men were beginning to seek high points that would command greater distances. Both were pausing after each long leap to carefully scan the near horizon for a first glimpse of the other.

Both were carefully reviewing in their minds the various elements of the problem of killing the other.

A gun could be aimed without compensation for distance, since the gravity deflection of the bullet would be negligible. A hit anyplace would be fatal, since it would puncture the suit and allow the air to escape. Leaps should be shorter now because it took almost a full minute on a long leap, and in that time the other could aim and fire if he were standing. Firing while in a leap would be dangerous because it could start a spin that would make it impossible to land on one's feet.

Each perfected his plans at the expense of the other, and in so doing aided the other to perfect his plans. It was impossible to do otherwise.

The tension in each was mounting. Each was breathing harder from the nervous tension as well as the exertion. In neither was there a thought of retreat or surrender. Every plan for treachery had had to be discarded.

"It isn't too late yet, Davey," Zaney made one last appeal. "Throw your gun away and come forward. I'll let you pass if I can see that you will take the lifeboat and go back home."

"Don't throw yours away, Zaney," Dave sneered. "I'm going to kill you even if you're unarmed. You're an unwelcome guest here without the good grace to leave when you know you're not welcome. You've got it coming."

"You get acquainted with a man in time," Zaney chuckled. "Even yesterday that would have gotten under my skin. How'd you and Bill ever get along together? Or is this obnoxiousness of yours just something new with your madness? Probably not. Maybe it never came to blows, but I'll bet you always tried to exert your will

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over him. He probably gave in to you lots of times on your prospecting trips when his ideas were better, just to keep peace in the family."

He chuckled at the flare of anger from Dave that told of his hitting the mark.

"Maybe even he fell in love with Bea-Anna," Zaney pursued the subject. "Maybe that's why he didn't come along with us. He saw that with you it wouldn't be a question of backing down. *You* loved Bea-Anna, so *you* would be the one to get her. To buck that he would have had to do what I'm going to have to do. Kill you. Right now if I knew that it would make Bea-Anna happy I'd go back and blast off, even letting you think I'm a coward. Sane or insane, you're too self-centered for that kind of unselfishness. You got along and were a nice pleasant fellow when you had your way. When Bea-Anna wouldn't give you your way you cracked up. When I wouldn't give you your way you decided to kill me. Now you're in the same class with Rek Barker."

He listened to Dave's dark thoughts for a few moments, concentrating on watching his step.

"The tragic thing about all this for you," Zaney went on after a while, "is that even if you kill me you won't win Bea-Anna. Even if she did love you, which I doubt, she couldn't trust herself to you. Not after all those centuries of security in her prison ship where, if she can't get out, by the same token nothing can get in."

Abruptly each saw the other.

ZANEY saw the flash of exploding powder as he sensed Dave's thought of firing. There could be no sound of a shot with no atmosphere to carry it.

He made no attempt to return the shot. He was too busy scanning the rock where he would land, estimating its value for protection and concealment, searching for a better spot to go to as soon as he could.

The bullet had missed him. How near or how far there was no time to guess at. Dave was aiming carefully now, making sure of his shot.

He sensed that Dave's shot would hit him. It would reach him just as he landed. Dave had the spot picked out and was waiting for just the right instant. At the last instant, in desperation, he pointed his automatic to one side and fired. The recoil pushed him in the other direction.

He landed in a shallow depression six feet to one side of where he had been going to light. He let himself go down, prone. Dave was out of sight. By the same token he was out of sight of Dave. And it placed him at a disadvantage. Dave could come closer, keeping watch on his hiding place and ready to fire at the first sight of his glassite helmet, while he would have to raise himself and be vulnerable for a moment before he could aim at Dave.

He sat up abruptly to end this advantage. Relief exploded the breath from his lungs. There was a small ridge of razor edged rock that still cut off the line of sight between them. Now things were equal. He could see Dave's helmet at the same time Dave saw his.

Dave was circling carefully to the left, still out of sight. He stopped when he realized the disadvantage to the one in motion.

"I can sit here and wait," Zaney decided, and smiled at Dave's anger and impatience to get things over with.

Dave fired at the raised outcropping, hoping the bullet would go through and by lucky chance hit him. The bullet's velocity was too great to shatter. It merely made a small hole.

Zaney started forward happily with

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the intention of peeking through that hole, then settled back when he realized that if he did that Dave could send another bullet through the same area and get him. Dave's thoughts jeered at him over this.

He sensed a sudden impulsive intention in Dave to fire several well spaced random shots through the thin rock wall. As he dropped down behind the protection of the wall of his shallow depression Dave dropped the idea before carrying it out.

But now he was doing some careful calculating. He was studying the image in Dave's thoughts of that bullet hole in relation to angle and distance, and aiming at a spot that might place a shot squarely at him. Even if it missed it might send up pieces of sharp rock that would cut into his spacesuit.

Quick as thought he fired three evenly distributed shots through the thin rock. He sensed Dave's cursing retreat and stood up, aiming quickly at the figure that appeared. Just as he fired, Dave sidestepped, so that the shot missed him. Then Dave dropped out of sight.

ZANEY chuckled mirthlessly as fear rose belatedly in Dave's mind at the narrowness of his escape.

Dave's fear was instantly replaced by anger and recklessness.

"I dare you to stand up with me and shoot it out, Zaney," he challenged.

"I admire your courage," Zaney taunted, "but I'm in no hurry. I can wait."

"Can you?" Dave said. "In another couple of hours you'll start to get sleepy. I can stay awake a long time yet. You were working for a long time before we started out and I wasn't. Remember?"

Zaney took advantage of Dave's concentration on what he was telepathing to stand up. He saw a small part of Dave's glassite helmet and fired at it, aiming carefully; but Dave sensed it and moved enough for the shot to miss.

"Missed!" Dave taunted.

"Yes, but I'm standing now," Zaney said calmly. "I have the advantage."

He aimed at the spot where Dave's helmet had vanished, directing the shot toward a spot he couldn't see, hoping the bullet would cut through the rock without deflection.

He caught Dave's thought of the bullet hitting too close to him and fired again before Dave could move.

In the same instant he knew that Dave was hit, and was throwing caution to the winds with the intention of taking him with him in death.

He started to drop down. He caught Dave's frantic realization that he had shoved himself off balance. Dave floated upward into sight, the escaping air from his suit acting as a rocket recoil to force him still higher.

Carefully he aimed at Dave's gun and pulled the trigger. He saw Dave's gun fly out of his hand. He holstered his own and leaped forward with the desperate hope of saving Dave from death in some way.

In midflight a sudden lonely silence settled on his mind as Dave died.

"MAY GOD have mercy on your soul, Davey boy," Zaney said sadly, closing his eyes against the bloated face inside the glassite helmet. "And as God is my witness, I didn't want to kill you. If there had been any chance to stop this mad farce without that I would have done so." Self accusing thoughts rose in him. "Sure!" he answered them. "I could have gone away and left him here on Lark Planetoid out of his mind, suffering in his madness, to kill himself and maybe Bea-Anna by

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his mad—"

He lifted his head and slowly stood erect.

"Yes," he whispered. "There's you, Bea-Anna. I don't know how you feel about all this. I know that you've been listening." He uttered a snorting bitter laugh. "You know I love you. Maybe it doesn't mean anything to you. It does to me. But I'm not the kind to try to push myself on you. The next move's up to you. I'm leaving. You can stop me with a word. If you don't give that word I'll be shoving off."

He looked up at the stars to get his bearings, turned, and started back toward the S.P. lifeboat hesitantly, listening with his mind, hoping. No faintest mental whisper answered him.

"Course I don't blame you," Zaney said. "I'm a killer now. And love isn't something you can turn on and off. Maybe you loved poor Davey. If you had said one word I would have gone and left him here with you."

He made his leaps higher and longer. There was no further need for caution.

"I really believe you would leave!" a voice formed in his thoughts.

"Course I would," Zaney said. "I wouldn't force my presence on anyone that didn't welcome it—Bea-Anna! You spoke to me!" Tears forced their way out of his eyes.

"In all of these ten million of your years since I left my home planet Tor you are the first one who would have left," her melodious voice whispered in awe. Her thought changed, became sharp. "I can give you immortality, make you young again forever. I will give you my word that I won't destroy you, but suffer you to take anything you want. That word has been given. Do you still say you would leave, to die of old age on your long journey back to your solar system if I told you to?"

She searched his mind, the fingers of her thoughts probing into the very depths of his being.

"You would!" her thought whispered, incredulous, but believing.

"Of course I would," Zaney said. "But you don't want me to. I can feel it."

"No, I don't want you to, Zaney," Bea-Anna whispered, her mental voice soft and tender. "Stay where you are and I'll come in a ship to pick you up. Every step is dangerous in those sharp rocks."

"Bu-bu-but you can't get out of your prison!" Zaney sputtered.

Bea-Anna's laughter flooded into his mind. "Prison?" she echoed. Then, "Yes, it was a prison, impregnable against even the proton linear accelerator you were building. There was only one way of opening it. Even I, by myself, couldn't open it."

"What way was that?" Zaney asked.

He had sat down so that he could devote his whole attention to Bea-Anna. He was marvelling that she could let him in on just what thoughts she wanted him to hear and keep all others from him.

"There!" she exclaimed suddenly. "The shell plate sealing over the launching tube of my lifeboat had grown together from atomic creep. I'll be with you in a few minutes. Meanwhile I'll tell you about my prison.

"You see, civilization came rather swiftly to my home planet Tor, the same as it did to the Earth. But it took a slightly different course. It rose to the point where there were two great powers after a series of global wars, just as with the Earth. It attained space travel just as the Earth. But immediately a final, disastrous war was precipitated, while on your own Earth it was averted.

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"ONLY A FEW million people were left. The cream of the crop so far as education was concerned. They determined to make sure that all future generations would remain at the peak of civilization. They devoted their entire efforts to perfecting science and making a Utopia on Tor. One after another the final secrets of physics fell under their combined attack. They discovered among other things how to create heavy matter of the type my prison is made of. In government they formed a constitution far more perfect than that of the United States and far more rigid, since there could be no amendments that violated the original laws or attempted to make them inoperative."

"Then they were inviting trouble!" Zaney said.

"Not for themselves," Bea-Anna went on. "But because of the inflexibility of that constitution I'm here today. The constitution outlawed capital punishment forever. It also ordered life imprisonment for certain incurable types of anti-social nonconforming individuals."

"Oh oh," Zaney said, grinning. "I can see the ending. "In their methodical way they discovered how to become immortal. After that Nature wouldn't take care of the problem of life imprisonment."

"Exactly!" Bea-Anna said. "Death was obsolete. The number of those serving life sentences would eventually be in the millions, since with the discovery of immortality they had added another law that everyone who accepted immortality must be the parent of two children so that the current generation couldn't endanger the future of the race by refusing to reproduce."

"And you refused to reproduce?" Zaney asked, a twinkle in his eye.

"No!" Bea-Anna said indignantly. "I was willing, but I couldn't find anyone to fall in love with. They diagnosed me as suffering from hyperidealism. I took cures. I took courses. It did no good. They studied me for a century or two, made changes in their formative teaching theory to make sure no one like me developed again. Then under the constitution they were forced to imprison me for life, the sentence being revokable if and only if I eventually fell in love.

"They built the court's order into my prison so that it would open if and only if I fell in love. Telepathically operated relays sealed in tamper proof cases held the doors."

"You poor kid," Zaney said sympathetically.

"I really tried," Bea-Anna said. "For a million years I hung around the sun system of Tor trying to fall in love with someone. Finally it became apparent that under the educational system as it had been perfected it would be utterly impossible for the personality type I could fall in love with to be evolved there."

"Yes," Zaney said. "In a million years that should become obvious all right."

"You're being amused at me," Bea-Anna said in a tone of thought that confessed she was also amused at herself. Then she became serious again. "I turned my back on my race, believing that nowhere in the universe would there be other human beings. For five million years I found none. Then I arrived in this part of the galaxy and found the human race scattered thinly here and there. The constitution wasn't in force here. There was hope again. But the pendulum was over too far toward savagery. I found no one."

"Until now?" Zaney asked softly.

He glanced upward. A small spaceship had appeared above the horizon

(*Concluded from page 57*)

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The Outpost on Ceres

By L. A. ESHBACH

Ceres is one of those numerous little planets, properly called planetoids, which are confined in their motions to what may be called an orbit of their own. Here we have a story of adventure and sacrifice of the heroic order.

LARRY DAMORE and the Outpost on Ceres—in the annals of the Earth, Venus, and Mars Transportation Lines, Inc., the two are inseparable. No one ever mentions one without referring to the other. Queer what it takes to make—or break—a man. For Larry Damore it took that ugly wilderness of barren, sun-parched rocks—Ceres, the largest of the asteroids. That, and the wreck of the space ship *Helios*.

This is Larry's story, but it begins with H. C. MacDonald, President of the E. V. & M. Lines. In those early days of interplanetary travel, when the E. V. & M. cruisers were the only commercial crafts in space, H. C. MacDonald was laying the foundation for the complex transport chain which now unites every inhabited sphere in the Solar System. Contacts had just been made with the people of Ganymede, the third moon of Jupiter. A freighter with a cargo of produce from the three planets had visited the satellite on a trading expedition that had been profitable for all involved—or almost all, for there was one exception.

Approximately 150 million miles from Ganymede, on the homeward journey, the freighter ran out of fuel and drifted powerless through space. No lives were lost, no suffering or hardship was caused by the delay—but the E. V. & M. Lines lost money on the trip. They had to outfit another cruiser and send it from Mars to the stranded vessel to tow it in. All of which cost money.

When H. C. MacDonald saw the financial figures of the trip go in the red, he shook his shock of bristling, iron-gray hair impatiently. This wouldn't do! True—it was the first time a freighter had attempted a round trip across the 340 million miles of space between Mars and Ganymede, so he'd have to make allowances. But it couldn't happen again! He issued orders to that effect.

An emergency refueling station between the two globes was the obvious solution, so the astro-technicians said—and the asteroids provided a means to that end. Of the fourteen hundred bodies then known, only Ceres, Pallas, Vesta, and Juno were large enough to be feasible. For various reasons the latter three were rejected—though little enough was known about any of them—and Ceres, because it was the largest, and because its orbit was comparatively close to the half-way mark, became the unanimous choice. Work was begun immediately to fit the little, airless sphere for its lone inhabitant, the guard of the refueling station—and the Outpost on Ceres became an actuality.

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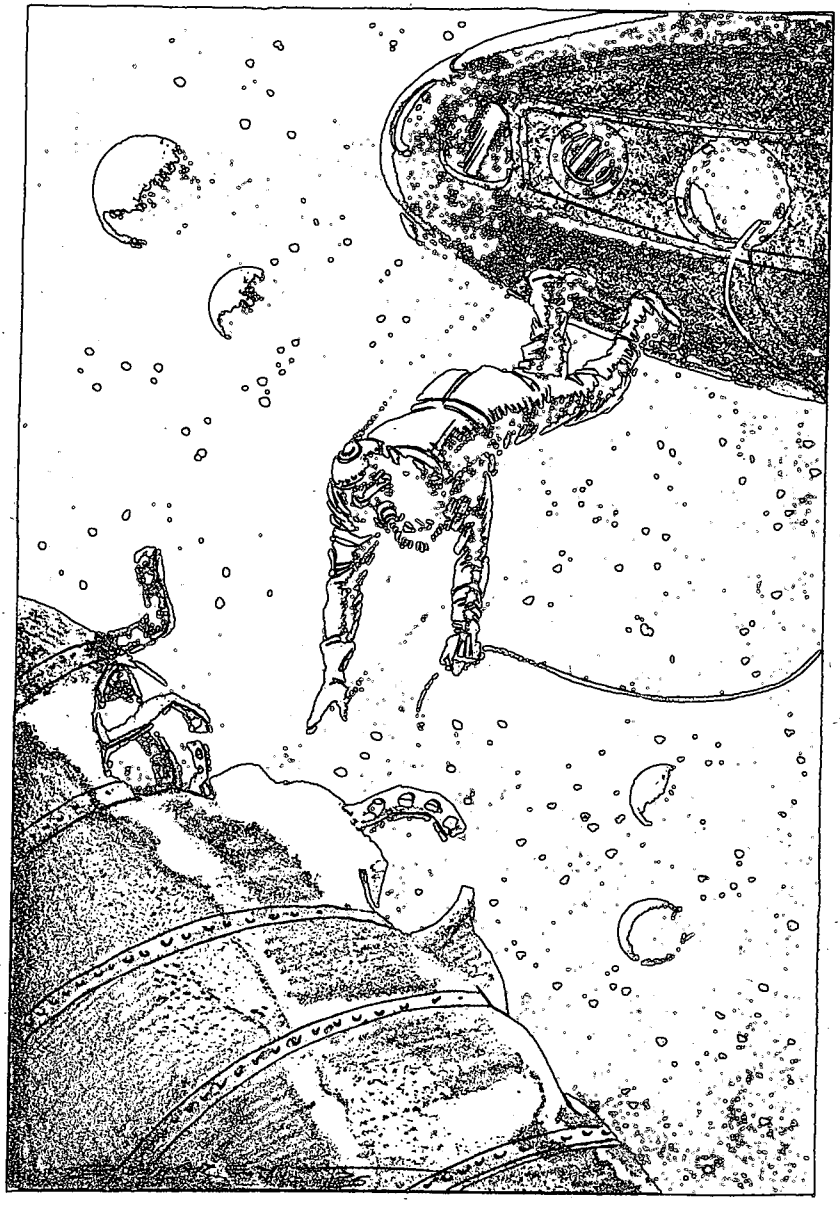

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When H. C. MacDonald sought for the man to become the first guard, Larry Damore was one of the few applicants for the job. The life on the asteroid was obviously one of the loneliest in the Solar System, and few men were willing to isolate themselves so completely—particularly young, educated men, the type H. C. MacDonald wanted. Larry was really the only applicant suited for the position—and he got it.

At his first sight of Larry Damore, interest lit up H. C. MacDonald's eyes. Tall, lean, with a long, dark face, high cheek bones, and deep-set, gray eyes, Larry couldn't have been called handsome. Nor was there anything very striking about him, unless it was his diffidence, his perpetual, half-apologetic self-effacement—a trait that seemed entirely out of harmony with his general appearance. Despite that, however, there was something magnetic about him, something that seized and retained the interest of an observer. It wasn't his face . . . . rather, it seemed to be something *behind* his face, a lurking fear, a deep-lying hurt that couldn't be entirely suppressed. It was that more than anything else, probably, that prompted H. C. MacDonald to hear Larry's story—and to send him to Ceres.

Summed up, Larry Damore's tale—and the tragedy of his life—could be told in a sentence. He was a drug addict—a dope fighter. There was more to it than that, of course; and H. C. MacDonald heard it all. Larry told it simply, frankly, and without any attempt at self-justification.

His first year out of college; an excellent position in a big observatory, following the study closest to his heart—astronomy. Then had come the crash in a passenger plane, and the injury to his spine. It wasn't incurable, but it had taken time—and the pain was incessant. They had used morphine to enable him to bear it. When he had recovered, had left the hospital, the morphine habit had persisted.

He had taken a cure but it had done no good. A second attempt had failed as dismally. Finally, he had gone north into the white wilderness of ice and snow where the drug could not be gotten—had fought his way to freedom.

A slip on the ice—a broken leg—a doctor who had administered morphine—and Larry Damore was back at the bottom. Now, applying for a job in the lonely emptiness of interplanetary space, he was making one more attempt to regain his manhood.

Despite his gruff exterior, H. C. MacDonald had a heart as big as his own great body; and when Larry Damore finished his low-voiced story, he gazed at him in tight-lipped silence, a strange light in his squinting eyes. Then his big hand gripped Larry's shoulder.

"Lad," he said quietly, "the job's yours. An' I hope—I *hope*—you'll pull through!"

THREE months on Ceres! Larry Damore laughed shortly. Three months, as time was reckoned on earth, he had been alone on this barren little world. Three months of—hell!

First, the struggle with his desire for a narcotic. He could smile at it now, a little grimly, perhaps, but it hadn't been amusing; no! His features stiffened as he thought of the hell-fire of desire like the concentrated thirst of a Sahara that had tortured every inch of him. But that was past now, the drug-craze subjugated—at least for the present.

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Loneliness had followed—the burden of utter solitude. He was alone on an airless mass of rock where there was no movement save his movements, no sounds but those that he brought into being—and the latter only within the two rooms of his air-tight, air charged metal dwelling. Loneliness . . . . he had never before realized the meaning of the word. But he knew now; knew what it meant to be startled by the sound of his own voice suddenly breaking the dead silence; knew the horror of a solitude that caused him to raise fevered eyes and hands to an unresponsive expanse of star-flecked blackness and plead for the sound of another human voice.

The drug had undermined his brain and body; weakness had made his isolation the more terrifying.

To occupy his thoughts during the first two months, he had explored the entire surface of the asteroid, removing some of the ballast from the feet of his space-suit, and bounding over the jagged world in tremendous soaring leaps. He had spent countless hours in inspecting the huge, squat, drum-shaped tank that held the compressed fuel-gases, familiarizing himself with every detail of its construction. He had sat for endless days before the ultra-short wave visaphone, listening for voices out in space—voices that did not come. He had read and reread books; he had tried to write a record of his excursions about the asteroid. But all had palled after a time.

Only his interest in astronomy had remained constant. During each of the short but frequent Ceresian nights he spent some time in the open beneath his portable refracting telescope, studying the heavens under conditions that were ideal. Observation was excellent even during the day, but he preferred the utter blackness of night.

This interest, he believed, had saved his sanity during those early weeks; now the suffering from his loneliness, like the drug habit, was largely a thing of the past. Three months without morphine had freed his body of its blight—forever, he hoped. His reactions to his environment had become those of a normal human being. His craving for companionship was no longer a mania.

Abruptly, with a half-impatient shake of his head, Larry rose to his feet. He had to guard against those ever-recurring thoughts of his solitude; they could make his lonely life no easier—and they *would* make it harder. He crossed the room to one of the thick, circular, convex windows —then suddenly whirled, startled.

Clang . . . . *clang* . . . . *clang!* Loud, clamorous, the bell tone rang through the boxlike chamber. A pause; then it came again. *Clang* . . . *clang* . . . . *clang!* An instant's hesitation, and Larry sprang toward the far wall.

Three notes—the distress signal! A message coming in on the Universal wave-length. He crouched before the powerful visaphone, tense fingers adjusting the instrument, transferring the message from the recording discs to the televisor screen. The rectangle of white glowed momentarily —then the control room of a space cruiser flashed into view.

A stern-faced figure stood stiff-legged in the foreground, despairing eyes staring into Larry's. Behind him a blue-clad pilot struggled with a bank of controls. Larry caught the frantic flow of words in the midst of his plea for aid.

"—rushing through space directly in our path. We've tried to avoid it,

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but it's too big—we saw it too late—we haven't a chance. The meteor will strike in a very few moments.

"The passengers are in air-tight compartments in the base of the ship. If we aren't completely smashed, they may escape. Rush a rescue cruiser out here to pick up survivors."

A short pause, then: "Private E. V. & M. cruiser *Helios*, bound from Mars to Callisto on a diplomatic visit. Following space-route 31, passing over asteroid belt. Pilot Banning speaking. We've entered the path of a huge meteor—"

With a single, sweeping motion Larry returned the message to the recording discs and closed the switch that lit up the tubes of a transmitter. His own strained figure and voice flashed through the void on the Universal wave-length.

"Space ship *Helios*—space ship *Helios!* Larry Damore speaking from Outpost on Ceres. Have your message. Am relaying it to Mars. Starting at once for Route 31."

Twice he repeated this, then switched the current back to the televisor screen. There was no sound save static; and the white rectangle stared blankly. Larry's throat was dry. There was death out there in the silence—sudden death.

Abruptly he spun away from the silent televisor; faced the transmitter. Adjusting it to the restricted wave-length of the E. V. & M. Lines, he reported the fate of the *Helios*, repeating the message again and again till he was certain it had reached listeners on Mars or earth. Help would come in the fastest ship in space—he was certain of it.

With a final check over the instrument board, Larry cut off all current except that of the emergency recorder and distress bell, and climbed into a massive space suit. A cross between a diver's suit and armor, it looked intolerably heavy; but in the weak gravitation of Ceres, with only one ten-thousandth of the mass of earth, it was almost weightless.

After testing his air-purifier, he passed through a vacuum chamber and paused an instant on the meteoric dust and jagged rocks of Ceres. Directly before him lay the huge fuel-gas tank, and close beside it, overshadowed by its great bulk, were two small, metal buildings—one, housing the dynamos that generated his electricity; the other, the hangar for his two-passenger cruiser. A single bound carried him across the intervening space; and a minute later he was seated at the control board of his craft.

A high-pitched roar burst from the base of the blunt nosed cylinder, and it tore through the opening in the hangar's roof, out into the blackness. Up it shot at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic, up, until it passed the orbit of even the most eccentric asteroid—above the asteroid belt. Then, studying his space chart, Larry headed toward Space-route 31 at maximum acceleration.

For the moment the controls needed no attention; it gave him a chance to think. He glanced into the gloom at a passing asteroid, and smiled mirthlessly. He had something to do now, something beside killing time. And perhaps he'd have human companions for a while—if any had survived the wreck. . . .

His plans for the night had gone awry. Down there somewhere in the asteroid belt, Vesta, smaller only than Pallas and Ceres, was moving slowly toward the latter. Their orbits would not intersect, but in seventeen hours they would make their closest approach to each other. He had intended

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studying the other asteroid, for, viewed from earth, Vesta, 240 miles in diameter, was three times as brilliant as Ceres, though Ceres was twice its size. Ever since its discovery in 1807 Vesta had been a mystery to terrestrial astronomers—and Larry had hoped to solve the enigma of its unnatural brilliancy.

He shrugged. What did it matter? There would be other opportunities. And somewhere before him in the blackness men and women might be drifting helplessly about in a battered derelict waiting for *him*. Vividly he pictured the tragedy of the *Helios;* vividly he saw fellow beings writhing in suffocation. . . . And for an instant he longed for a "shot" of morphine. . . . Then cursed himself for his weakness.

After a time Larry's thoughts struck off on another tangent. The *Helios*. That name seemed familiar. He repeated it aloud, but though that sense of familiarity remained, he could associate it with nothing tangible.

On and on his craft sped, with Larry peering steadily ahead into the starry firmament. Occasionally he would glance at his space-chart and adjust his course to conform with his readings. Skillfully handled charges shot from lateral vents could correct any minute deviation from the route set by the chart. And the latter was practically infallible, for, with delicately balanced pointers that were controlled by variations of the gravitational pull of every body in the System, it could only fail through the faulty human element that entered into its construction.

The flight to Route 31 seemed almost endless to the taut nerves of Larry Damore, though actually it required a little less than four hours. But he reached it finally, and began the search for the wrecked *Helios*, a wide, powerful beam of white radiance spreading from the nose of his flier.

His discovery of the drifting derelict after a long and futile quest was the result of good fortune rather than design. He had traversed many miles of Space-route 31, moving toward both Mars and Callisto, without catching a glimpse of the *Helios*. Despairing, at last, he had sent his craft careening aimlessly through space—and his beam of light had been reflected from an irregular metal surface far to the right.

Instantly he realized why he had missed the cruiser, and berated himself for his stupidity. The velocity of the meteor had been so great that it had borne the *Helios* along with it for some distance. Momentum had carried it racing in the meteor's wake.

A few minutes of careful maneuvering—and he was beside the wreck, following the same course, and moving with identical speed, coasting with rocket charges cut off.

The *Helios* was in a deplorable state. The fore part had been torn away completely, and the rest of it, except for a small section near the base, had been crushed into a shapeless hulk. Larry surveyed it gloomily. It seemed absurd to imagine that anyone could be alive in that ruin. But he had to be certain—though he dreaded to see the results of sudden death that the *Helios* was sure to reveal.

With an impatient shake of his head he prepared to visit the derelict. Securing a long, coiled steel cable from a supply chest, he let it unwind, then carried it through the airlock into space. Drifting along beside the boat, propelling himself by means of regularly spaced hand grips, he reached

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its base, and fastened the cable to a large metal ring put there for that purpose.

Then placing his feet against the side of the space flier, his head pointing toward the *Helios*, the end of the unwound cable held in one hand, he kicked vigorously. In an unwavering line he shot toward the wreck. Almost upon it, he swung on the cable, and with out-thrust feet checked his flight. A moment later he floated through an irregular rift in the walls and set foot on the battered cruiser.

After fastening the cable securely, anchoring the space boats together, he looked around him. Luxurious furniture floated aimlessly about, its motion maintained by occasional collisions with the walls. Amid the wreckage drifted the lifeless body of a tall, frail, pink-skinned Martian. Blood had gushed from his long nose and wide, pendulous ears, and great, ugly ruptures had torn his skin. With the sudden loss of atmospheric pressure, the man had literally burst! Sickened, Larry turned his eyes away.

A wave of weakness swept over him. He glanced back toward the aperture in the wall. It was foolish to waste time in this derelict. They were all dead—must be. He could turn back—His lip curled in derision. Hell of a brave man he was! Savagely he pushed against the wall and floated through a doorway into the next room.

A sudden gasp of surprise and relief escaped him as he glanced across this chamber—a dining salon. Floating toward him were two figures in space suits! And they were alive!

In his excitement Larry called a greeting—then realized its futility, and waved. The approaching figures waved in turn, and a moment later joined him. A gloved hand caught Larry's and gripped it tensely. A handsome face—*too* handsome, Larry thought—stared into his, and full lips framed the words!

"LORD, but I'm glad to see you! . . . . We're alone—the only survivors."

Larry swung his gaze to the other figure; and he was looking at a woman—small, piquant, blonde-haired. Her blue eyes stared from beneath tear-reddened lids, alight with dawning recognition.

"Marcia MacDonald!" Larry exclaimed. She smiled wanly; and her lips said, "Larry." Then pointing to herself and her companion, she indicated that there were none living beside themselves.

Nodding, Larry waved toward the doorway through which he had come. With one accord they propelled themselves into the adjoining room and from there to the outside. Following Larry's example, they drew themselves hand over hand along the steel cable toward the space-flier.

The thoughts of Larry Damore were in a turmoil. Marcia MacDonald out here in space! The irony of it! The daughter of H. C. MacDonald—she must be his daughter, for the *Helios*, he remembered now, was the big boss's private cruiser. And she was the girl he loved, had hoped to marry—before his downfall!

He had met her in college, and had loved her from the first. He had been on the verge of proposing marriage when his accident had occurred—and he had seen her for the last time when she had visited him in the hospital. . . . . He couldn't very well ask her to be his wife now, could he? Larry Damore, a dope fighter—and the daughter of H. C. MacDonald! He

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grinned bitterly, a rebellious light creeping into his eyes. It would be pleasant to associate with her under the circumstances, pleasant—as hell!

Reaching Larry's craft, the three passed through the airlock into the cramped interior. When the pressure gauge registered "normal," they removed their spherical isol-glass helmets.*

The instant she could talk, Marcia MacDonald cried with some of her characteristic lightness:

"Larry Damore—you—out here in space!"

Larry nodded somberly. "Working for your father, Miss MacDonald. The guard of the emergency refueling station on Ceres."

"Well, it was lucky for us that you were here, for if you hadn't been—" Marcia's attempt at a smile failed dismally.

"Yes, old man," her companion interposed, "you came when we needed you most. Our oxygen supply would have lasted about ten hours longer; then—we'd have gone the way of Darec Plnov and Na Gertswa, our Martian fellow-travellers." The man's expression was cordial enough, but his friendliness seemed somewhat forced. Perhaps, Larry thought, he had not liked the fact that Marcia knew him.

Rather stiffly he answered, "I'm glad I could help you, Mr.—"

"Ray Starke!" Marcia concluded quickly. "Sorry—I should have introduced you two. But I'm afraid I'm not quite myself just now."

Larry smiled deprecatingly and gazed out through an isol-glass porthole at the shattered *Helios*. His attitude became suddenly businesslike.

"Are you certain, Miss MacDonald, that there were no other survivors?"

"Absolutely certain," Starke answered for her. "You see, this wasn't an ordinary passenger cruise. It's Mr. MacDonald's private car which we were using for a—a diplomatic trip to Callisto. The Callistonians are a peaceful people, according to the Ganymedians, so Mr. MacDonald permitted his daughter to represent him. I am the agent for the smaller stockholders; and the two Martians were emissaries from their branch of the company. Venus, of course, had no official representation. Beside the four of us there were only the members of the crew—two pilots, a cook and his roustabout. All of the crew were carried away by the meteor, and the Martians, because they didn't think space suits were necessary, were killed instantly. We're the only ones left."

Larry turned toward the control board. "Such being the case," he said, "I believe we'd better be heading for Ceres. Your father will be worried about you, Miss MacDonaid; I want to relieve his mind as quickly as possible."

Leaving the two to make themselves as comfortable as they could in the crowded room, he sent his craft roaring through space, the wreck of the *Helios* trailing after them at the end of the steel cable.

GLOOMILY Larry Damore gazed out through a round isol-glass window into the Ceresian night. His gray eyes shone dully under frowning brows. His mind was troubled, striving to fathom the inexplicable and uselessly cruel caprice of fate which had recalled Marcia MacDonald from

*(Note) Isol-glass, the transparent, glasslike substance used extensively in the construction of space cruisers and space suits, is one of the major achievements of modern chemical science. It is an alloy—if the word may thus be used—of various transparent elements, which, together, isolate and cut off all forms of radiation that are harmful to human life, permitting only the beneficial rays to pass through it. Malleable and extraordinarily tough.

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the mists of memory to torture him with vain longings.

They were asleep now, the girl occupying his bed in the other room, and Ray Starke stretched out on a pneumatic couch in a near by corner. He could hear their soft, regular breathing. His own couch remained untouched. There would be no sleep for him this night; his thoughts were a horde of mocking devils that gave him no rest.

Lord—what he'd give for a shot of dope to quiet his nerves! He licked his lips—then suddenly clamped his jaws together, silently cursing himself for his craving. Dope be damned! . . . . Then he shook his head. No sense in letting himself go. Eventually calmness returned.

Queer, he thought, how events were interwoven in the vast loom of life. On one hand, his wish to overcome the drug habit, and his assignment to this lonely outpost. On the other, the whim that had prompted an adventure-loving girl to persuade her father to make a place for her in a diplomatic interplanetary voyage—where she certainly did not belong. That, and a massive meteor hurtling through space for incalculable ages, to strike a space ship at a certain point in its flight. Queer!

Suddenly Larry's lips twisted wryly. There had been nothing "queer" about his recent conversation with Marcia. That had been agony.

Upon reaching his metal home several hours earlier, he had reported to his superiors the rescue of Marcia and her companion. Then, while the three of them had talked, he had prepared a hasty meal for his guests. At its conclusion, Marcia, with characteristic abruptness, had announced that she wished to speak with Larry alone—"to talk over old times." Taking the hint, but with poor grace, Starke had decided to do a little exploring before darkness fell, and had left them.

Marcia had gone directly to the thought that had been troubling her. Larry remembered her words:

"Larry Damore, you're not yourself! You're too quiet, too reserved. What's wrong?"

Then he had told her his story, omitting nothing.

"I'm here now," he had concluded, "thousands of miles from drugs. I can't go back—and even if I could, I wouldn't have the courage. Here I can fight against the craving with half a chance of winning. On earth something might happen—the dope—and I don't think I'd have enough will power left to take myself away from the stuff again. I know I'm a coward—but I can't help it."

"Oh, Larry—I'm sorry, *so* sorry," she had whispered.

He had looked into her eyes, had seen a world of pity there—but he hadn't wanted pity—didn't want it now! He had been glad when Starke had returned.

Spineless, she must think him—and she was justified. He ground his teeth savagely. He hadn't asked for the drug in the first place, had he? It—it was hell! Memories of past happiness with Marcia tortured him—for he loved the girl.

With unseeing eyes Larry stared out into the nocturnal gloom. Then slowly his mind began to record the things he saw. A vast ebony dome, the setting for a spangled splendor of gleaming gems. No; they were eyes, some huge, round, owlish—the neighboring asteroids; others narrowed, mere pin-points of light—the distant stars.

One of those globes was Vesta, the most enigmatic of the asteroids; it

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must be that glittering, silvery orb to the left—the impressive and most brilliant body in the heavens. Idly Larry studied the sphere, an idea fixing itself in his brain. Suddenly he decided. More than an hour of darkness remained; he couldn't sleep; so he'd spend that hour beneath his telescope studying Vesta at close range.

Stealthily he secured his space suit, and got into it without disturbing the sleepers. As soundlessly he opened the air-lock, passed through it into the Ceresian night.

His telescope was stored in the space-boat hangar; lighting his way with an electric torch, he crossed the broken terrain. Reaching the hangar, he carried the telescope, already set on its tripod, to a huge, flat-topped rock, and trained it on Vesta. Then he seated himself on a small stone beneath the instrument and peered through the eyepiece.

An instant he stared, uncomprehending; then his eyes grew wide and fixed in frozen astonishment. Little wonder that Vesta shone with thrice the brilliance of any other asteroid; little wonder that no one had explained the cause of that brilliance. For Vesta was encased in a sheathing of mail!

A huge ball of silvery white, she hung in the sky, casting back the rays of the sun in a blinding torrent. Like some gigantic, spherical space ship, she seemed to Larry, with her highly polished surface dotted with small, circular apertures. Apertures too regularly spaced to be the result of anything but intelligent planning.

With his mind a chaotic jumble, Larry studied the unnatural sphere. What was the reason for the coating of metal? What manner of beings had created it? Suddenly he blinked, then gazed steadily through the eyepiece. Something, a drifting cloud of silvery mist, seemed to be flowing from the round openings, to drift and eddy and swirl about the little world. Steadily the cloud grew, obscuring portions of the metal surface. Now it began to move away from Vesta; and with its motion, it became more tenuous, more difficult to see. Finally Larry lost it among the stars.

For the remainder of the short night he kept his gaze fixed on Vesta, but it remained unchanged.

Dawn, sweeping over the low, airless Ceresian mountains in a single burst of glory, cut short his observations. Rising, he sprang across the rocks to his home. Noisily he passed through the air-lock and burst into the room, forgetting that his guests would still be sleeping.

Ray Starke snapped erect, startled. "What happened?" he demanded, blinking sleepily.

From the other room came sounds of uneasy motion.

Larry grinned. "Sorry I disturbed you. But I've just seen something that to me—or any other astronomer—is about the biggest thing that ever happened." Rapidly he told what he had discovered.

"All very interesting," Starke commented stiffly, "but I don't think it's important enough to warrant your waking me." He glanced through a window. "Since it's daylight I suppose I might as well get dressed." He slipped into the few outer garments he had removed for the night.

Larry shrugged. "I've already apologized; I'm afraid I can't do any more."

At that moment Marcia's voice came through the partition. "May I come out?"

Larry and Starke answered in unison; and the girl joined them, the ner-

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vous horror gone from her face. She was smiling disapprovingly.

"There seems to be some disagreement between you two," she chided. "It just isn't being done, you know. What did you see, Larry?"

Eagerly Larry described his discovery. As he talked he saw Marcia's face light up with wondering interest.

"I want to see that!" she exclaimed. "Don't you, Ray?"

"Oh, yes; of course," he answered without attempting to conceal his boredom.

"Is it still visible, Larry? Can I see it now?"

Larry nodded; and Marcia immediately began putting on her space suit. With studied indifference Starke followed her example. Ready, the three passed into the open.

Suddenly Marcia pointed upward questioningly. Larry's eyes followed the direction of her gaze, and he stopped short, an unaccountable stab of anxiety prodding him.

High above was that cloud of silvery mist that had come from Vesta two hours earlier. But now it was no cloud; it had become a swarm of small, metallic bodies that reflected the sunlight in a white shimmer. A swarm that drew steadily closer.

An instant Larry watched the shifting mass; then he motioned Marcia and Starke back into the boxlike building. About to object, Marcia met Larry's eyes, and she followed Starke without remonstrance. As they passed from sight, Larry sprang to his telescope and pointed it toward the metallic horde.

God! The word was more of a prayer than a curse. What were these things? Thousands upon thousands of slender metal tubes about a half-inch in diameter and three or four inches in length were flashing toward Ceres! Each end tapered to a needle-sharp tip—a swarm of double-pointed projectiles. Could these be the intelligences that had given Vesta her metal cloak? Or were the cylinders but the vehicles that bore the inhabitants of the asteroid? The latter was probably the truth.*

STEADILY larger grew the swarm, passing beyond the field of the telescope. Were they friendly or hostile? If hostile, they were drawing too close for safety. Straightening, he glanced upward—and with a startled cry sprang for shelter. The things were darting all around him!

He was beset by a horde of them, a deafening fusillade rattling against his space suit. With flailing arms he beat them off, but they returned with increased fury. He was staggering drunkenly when he reached the door of the airlock; his head was ringing—and through it struggled a thought of thankfulness for the strength of his isol-glass helmet.

The door swung open, and Marcia and Ray Starke stood in the doorway. Twin streams of flame shot from their rocket pistols, spraying back and forth through the ranks of the silvery tubes. Like wax they burned under the blasts; in an instant the main body of the things darted out of range. As Larry stumbled into the airlock his companions ceased firing, and flung shut the door.

As the three removed their helmets, Larry smiled grimly. "One good turn deserves another . . . . Thanks."

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*(Note) Later investigation revealed that the little cylinders were the space-flying vessels of Vesta, each outfitted with a crew of six, minute, intelligent, worm-like creatures. These beings lived beneath the surface of the asteroid; they had hollowed out long, winding tunnels within the solid rock; had built strange cities within which to dwell. Using an alloy of aluminum, abundant in their world, they had constructed the metal roof to prevent the escape of the rarefied air they manufactured. This permitted the growth of the plant life upon which the worm things lived.

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Neither Starke nor Marcia answered. They were listening to the ceaseless rain of impacts like a furious hail storm battering the roof and sides of the building. Rapidly it mounted to a steady roar. The girl crossed to one of the windows, and her face paled as she saw the thousands of tiny projectiles. Facing Larry, she raised her voice above the din.

"How long will the wall keep them out? It can't last very long, can it?"

There was grave concern on Larry's face. The roar came from a single section of the wall now.

"Not very long, Marcia. For some reason they want to get in here—and I don't know how we can stop them."

Starke looked at the pistol he was holding. "We can give them some opposition with this; the little devils can't stand the heat."

"Too many of them," Larry said curtly, shaking his head.

For silent moments they looked into each other's faces. What could they do? Starke stared fearfully through a window. Marcia watched Larry who was deep in thought. She saw his expression change subtly. Something indefinable appeared on his face. Suddenly he spoke, his voice almost casual.

"I have a plan that should work. I've considered it from all angles, and it seems fool-proof. The space-car is the only way out. But if we'd just run for it, the little imps might puncture our suits before we made it. And if we'd get into it safely we'd probably be followed out into space, and have the boat disabled there—since the things seem to be just as fast as a space ship.

"As I see it, there's only one way for you, Marcia, and Starke to escape. I'll go out first and start running away from the buildings. When our little friends follow me—I'm sure they will—and we're out of sight, you two rush for the space ship and head toward Mars. You can operate the boat, Marcia. Perhaps I can double back and get into the shack again, and make a stand against the things."

Marcia's heart leaped. So this was the self-styled coward, the weakling drug-addict who feared to go back to Earth! But every atom of her cried out against his making the sacrifice.

"No!" she objected emphatically, "I won't stand for that. It wouldn't be fair. You—you'd be committing suicide while we ran like cowards!"

With an effort Larry ignored her; addressed Starke. "It's the only way to save Miss MacDonald, so we'll have to do it."

Starke flushed. "But it isn't fair for you to take all the risk. Let's toss up a coin."

Larry shook his head decisively. "Nothing doing! It's my job. I took you from the *Helios*, and it's up to me to see that you get safely back to earth or Mars. I stay."

With reluctance that poorly concealed his relief, Starke agreed. "We shouldn't do it," he said, "but if you insist—"

"Okay, get ready to go. I'll want one of the rocket pistols; and when you leave, don't close the outer airlock door. Move fast when the time comes. That's all."

Marcia was silent. She knew nothing she could say would deter Larry, but her heart rebelled against his giving his life for theirs—for hers! She watched him don his helmet through a blurring mist of tears; began putting hers on mechanically.

Quickly Larry shook hands, gripping Marcia's fiercely; then he crossed to the door—and was gone.

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For a moment there was no change, the roar on the wall continuing unabated. Then Marcia caught a glimpse of Larry dashing away in gigantic leaps, a swarm of the metal projectiles after him. The clattering din began to diminish, and in a short time had almost ceased.

They watched until Larry vanished below the near by horizon of the little world. Then they hurried through the airlock, leaving the second door ajar. They were met by several hundred of the little cylinders which immediately attacked them; but they blasted these into slag with the remaining pistol, and reached the space-car without mishap.

A minute later they were seated in the control room, and the little craft roared into space, bearing them toward Mars—and safety.

H. C. MACDONALD'S unruly gray hair bristled angrily as he entered the control room of the express cruiser *Vulcan*. His rugged features were set in an expression of stern relentlessness.

"Schneider," he addressed the pilot, "more speed—more speed! There's a lad out there on Ceres who saved my daughter's life. Stuck to his post and let Marcia and that young squirt, Starke, get away in his boat while *he* risked his neck! An'—an', by God, if you'll find some way to stop. D'you hear?"

"Yes, sir. But if I put on more speed, sir, our momentum will make it difficult to land when we reach the asteroid, sir."

"Momentum be damned!" MacDonald roared. "I want more speed; and you'll find some way to stop. D'you hear?"

"Very well, sir." Schneider crouched over the controls.

The *Vulcan*, almost empty of passengers, leaped suddenly ahead like a falling meteor. She literally tore through space, her rocket vents thundering— onward, toward Ceres.

Standing before the space chart, H. C. MacDonald fixed his eyes on the luminous speck that represented the asteroid. And in another part of the cruiser Marcia stared anxiously through an isol-glass window into the blackness, hoping against hope for the safety of Larry. But her heart was heavy, her face pale, her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

"Ceres ahead!" At last the welcome words rang through the cruiser. Skillfully Pilot Schneider manipulated the controls, sending retarding rocket charges from the nose of the *Vulcan*. At first there was no appreciable difference in their pace, but as the full power of the forward check-vents was applied, the cruiser slowed its headlong flight, and in a very few minutes floated almost motionless in space.

"We've done it, sir," Schneider announced quietly.

"I knew you would." H. C. MacDonald left the room to get into a space suit.

Through a powerful binocular the pilot searched the surface of Ceres for sight of the great fuel tank and the boxlike house—the refueling station. Back and forth across the little world he sent the cruiser, but nowhere could he see that which he sought. Finally he caught sight of a wide, shining metal plain blotched here and there with irregular masses of black. He let the ship sink toward it. A minute passed—and the *Vulcan* landed a hundred feet from the gleaming area. Within the cruiser everyone clustered at the windows.

Before them lay an irregular plain of Ceresian rock, blackened in spots

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as by searing flame; in others, coated with metal, as though molten nickel-steel had flowed and splashed over them. There was no motion, nothing to indicate life.

"What—what happened?" H. C. MacDonald muttered.

Marcia shook her head dumbly, biting her lip in dread. What *could* have happened? For this was where Larry's home had been—she recognized the topography of the place. But the tank, the three buildings, even the wrecked fragment of the *Helios*—all were gone! Fused into metal to coat the rocks!

And Larry—where was he? And where were the little metal things? Perhaps they had . . . . Marcia uttered a horrified gasp. Could they have done this, burning Larry with the refueling station, then leaving for their own world? She buried her face in her hands to shut out the thought.

"What is it, Marcia?" her father asked anxiously.

Sobbing, she explained. "And, dad," she ended, "I knew him at college—loved him there . . . . And I—I love him now!"

"But—the drugs—"

Quickly she pressed her fingers over his lips. "That—that's past. I *know* he had overcome the habit—and I know he loves—loved me."

H. C. MacDonald swallowed an annoying something that rose into his throat. Awkwardly he patted the girl's shoulder.

"Maybe there's still a chance. You may be mistaken about what happened here. At least, we'll search for him."

Quickly he issued orders. Everyone on board was to start in a different direction and search for fifteen minutes. At the end of that time they were to return to the *Vulcan*, enter the cruiser, move a few miles away, and search again—until they'd find him, or abandon hope. Each would be armed with a rocket pistol in case of an emergency.

Clamping on their helmets, they began their quest—Marcia and her father, Ray Starke, Martin Lyman, M.D., the four members of the crew, including Schneider, and an official from Mars. Slowly they moved about, their eyes fixed intently on the ground.

At the end of fifteen minutes Marcia returned with downcast heart. She had discovered nothing. And her father, she saw, had had no more success. Nor had the others, already assembled about the cruiser. But suddenly she caught sight of Schneider; and—and he was bearing something in his arms!

Wildly she raced across the rough plain, running, leaping, soaring, and tumbled through the airlock after the pilot. The rest followed hastily; and the door was closed behind them.

They looked anxiously at Larry Damore, lying limply in the pilot's grasp. He seemed lifeless. His space suit was badly battered, and its legs had been charred and warped by intense heat. Marcia MacDonald repressed a choking sob, and despair crept into her eyes.

Gently Schneider lowered Larry to a pneumatic couch; as gently removed his helmet. As he did so, Dr. Lyman was discarding his own cumbersome space suit; then he removed Larry's. In the midst of this procedure Marcia brushed past him, slipped her arm under Larry's head, and looked pleadingly into his white, drawn face. His eyelids flickered open, and he ventured a faint, painful smile.

"Marcia," he whispered.

Dr. Lyman drew her away. "He needs immediate attention, Miss Mac-

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Donald." He bent over Larry and gave him a quick but thorough examination. "Hmmm," he mused, "apparently there aren't any broken bones, at any rate." He held a stimulant to Larry's lips.

"No, doctor," he said slowly, after swallowing the liquor, "I'm rather badly burned about the legs, I believe, and my back seems somewhat bruised—and that's about all." He clenched his teeth for an instant to check a spasm of pain, then continued: "When the little projectiles chased me, you see—or maybe you don't see—I doubled back toward the house to make a stand there. But they were too much for me—I saw I couldn't make it. Then I got an idea—a wild one—but decided to try it. Jumped for the top of the fuel-gas tank, and reached it safely. The little things followed. When I was sure they were all there, I opened the pressure vent at the top, let some gas escape—and risked everything on one long chance. It took perfect timing—but it worked.

"Jumping backward with all my strength, I aimed at the opening with my pistol and pressed the trigger. The rush of flame caught my legs—*and* the little projectiles—but the explosion saved me. I felt myself spinning through empty space—then I woke up here."

He stopped, his face distorted by pain despite his efforts to suppress it. Noting this, the doctor said:

"You've said enough, young man. Your injuries aren't actually dangerous, but you must be suffering terrible pain. I'll give you something that'll ease it in a jiffy."

From his case he drew a hypodermic syringe, a vial of sterilized water, and a bottle of little white tablets. After putting a proper amount of water into the syringe, he added a single tablet, let it dissolve, then returned the plunger to the glass tube. "A little morphine will do the trick," he smiled.

Marcia stepped forward impulsively, a hand raised in protest; but when she saw Larry's face, she paused. His expression was queer; it defied analysis. Eagerness was there, and pain—but that was not all.

As Dr. Lyman approached with the instrument poised, Larry stretched forth impatient fingers. "I'll take it, doc," he said in a low, vibrant voice.

For endless moments he studied it as it lay in the palm of his hand. There was no sound save the unconsciously heavy breathing of those who watched him. As a demon of pain gripped him, his hand closed—then opened again. And Larry Damore, with great deliberation, pressed the pistol of the syringe and sent the drug hissing through the air.

"I don't need that stuff," he said, quiet triumph in his voice, "don't want it. I'm man enough to stand a little pain, I believe." He returned the hypodermic to the doctor.

"Get ready for the trip back to Mars—or earth. I can stand it this way!"

"Larry!" Suddenly Marcia awoke from a stunned silence. "Larry!" The single word was a song of joy. An instant later their arms were about each other, and her smiling lips met his in a long, glad kiss.

H. C. MacDonald cleared his throat. "The lad pulled through," he murmered huskily.

LARRY DAMORE and the Outpost on Ceres—in the annals of the E. V. & M. the two are inseparable. For Larry was the first and only man to be assigned to that lonely little world.

(*Concluded on page 57*)

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The OUTCAST

by S. M. TENNESHAW

Hell broke loose in the Venusian jungle when Jack Bradley found out he wasn't really an outcast — and set out to get his revenge!

HIS MACHETE strokes had weakened to the point where they were little more than futile swipes at the heavy Venusian foliage. His arms, working ceaselessly for days, seemed to hang from his shoulders like leaden weights. And his mind echoed the green, buzzing confusion of the jungle around him.

Two days. Two days that seemed like two years. Hack, and stumble. Hack, and stumble through the opening his machete had cleared. And always ahead there was the seemingly impenetrable wall of the jungle, pressing down upon him with its heat, a buzzing enemy of insects adding to his misery.

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Wearily he slashed again and stumbled on. Somewhere ahead, he knew, lay Tellus Spaceport. Somewhere a hundred miles away beyond the mountain range he glimpsed at rare intervals at the horizon's end. He slashed his way toward that goal. For he knew his only chance lay in reaching it alive.

A rotting log jutted in his path and he sank down upon it wearily, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Almost mechanically his mind turned back to what he left behind there in the jungle. And the thought was not a pleasant one.

For years Earthmen had been attempting to colonize Venus and stretch forth the frontiers of Tellus beyond the Moon. And he knew they had succeeded to a degree. But every step gained had been won with an equal amount of blood. For the savages who inhabited Venus did not like the idea of Earthmen taking over the planet. But Earthmen doggedly fought on.

He thought of the colony he left behind him. And of the subsequent events that had happened almost too fast for him to grasp.

Old Borden Farnsworth had struck a rich vein a month ago. And the Farnsworth colony boomed. Ore trains were bringing in record hauls of platinum. And the old man had been a wreath of smiles.

"Bradley," he had said one morning after Jack Bradley brought in the weekly ore train. "I've looked forward to this day for over fifty years. Used to be a time when every colony had to fight to bring the ore trains in. But it begins to look like the Venusians are finally learning they can't stop us."

But a few days later the old man had changed his tune. Men were disappearing. And when they found there wasn't much left to recognize them. The answer was all too clear. The Venusians had attacked again. But even that wasn't the worst.

Bradley's ore train had been massacred. The Venusians had been drunk and armed with automatic rifles. Bradley's men hadn't a chance. It had been a miracle that he and a few scattered colonized native supply carriers had escaped with their lives. The old man had fairly flown into a rage.

"I might have known it!" he exploded. "Somebody's deliberately running guns and liquor to these savages! Some dirty outcast Earthman! If I ever lay my hands on him!"

SUSPICION fell for awhile on Jason Brail and his colony fifty miles west. But Brail was in no position to know the Farnsworth ore train schedule so he had to be ruled out.

Things kept getting worse. Every ore train Jack Bradley led was attacked. And blood ran free. The old man was nearing apoplexy.

And then one day things reached a climax.

Bradley had just reported the loss of his latest train to armed drunken savages, when Mandel Craig, assistant engineer to old Farnsworth, and a group of others strode into the old man's office.

Craig walked up to Bradley.

"Lost another train, eh, Bradley?"

Jack Bradley nodded wearily but noticed the strange gleam in Craig's eyes. Craig turned to the old man.

"For about a month now we've been losing men and shipments to armed savages. And in that time I've learned a few things." His eyes played on the tense features of Jack Bradley. The old man was leaning forward, listening. Craig continued.

"It seems mighty peculiar that the only ore trains to get attacked are

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those led by Bradley—"

"What the hell are you driving at!" Bradley demanded, his face growing angrily perplexed.

"Just this," replied Craig. "It seemed strange to me that you should always come back from these attacks when most of the others didn't. And two nights ago I learned something to make my suspicions right." He paused and gazed over at Bradley, a hard smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. Then:

"Two nights ago I saw Bradley here steal out of the stockade and meet a group of Venusians. He was probably telling them of the ore shipment he was leading back in a day. Luckily these others," he motioned to the silent group of men standing behind him, "saw Bradley too. It seems pretty obvious now who's been selling us out!"

Bradley leaped forward.

"That's a lie!" he roared, and dove at Craig, his eyes flaming. But the others stepped in and held him back. Then the old man stepped forward. His eyes had grown hard.

"Is this true?" he demanded. "Did you see Bradley do that?"

They nodded affirmation. Farnsworth turned to Bradley.

"I never thought you'd do such a thing! But I've been wrong before."

"I tell you it's a lie! I never left my quarters that night!"

"You're forgetting, Bradley," Craig cut in, "that you were *seen*. You can't lie out of that!"

Old man Farnsworth faced Bradley.

"All along something told me that this was an inside job. But I didn't want to believe it. This only confirms my suspicions. If I had more proof of your damned outcast dealings with those savages I'd run you back to Tellus Spaceport myself for trial. But as it is I want you to clear out of here and if you ever show your face around this country again you'll be shot on sight! And I'll see to it that the word's spread along the line. You'll find out that gun-running outcasts aren't wanted on Venus!"

NOW AS Jack Bradley sat on the rotting log, brushing a sworm of noisome insects from his face, these thoughts made his mind numb. It had been a rotten frame-up, and he had had no way of proving it. But what was the reason behind it? Why had those men vowed they'd seen him talking to Venusians?

Angrily he swiped at the buzzing horde of insects that swarmed about him. It seemed to him the buzzing was getting louder every second.

Then suddenly he jumped to his feet. The buzzing was getting louder. But it wasn't the buzzing of insects. It was a heavy sputtering drone coming closer. Bradley strained his ears. The staccato drone grew louder. Then he recognized it; it was the sound of a rocket plane approaching!

Bradley searched the cloudy sky through a cleft in the jungle foliage and then he saw it. It was a small Hartford V47 rocket, and it was in trouble. Its blasts were silencing. He could see the ship knife toward the ground.

Bradley tensed, bracing himself for the crash. The jungle shook with it, and then silence.

He gripped his machete and slashed hurriedly forward toward the wreck.

Sweat was pouring down his face when he reached the small clearing in which the rocket had crashed. As he ran forward he saw someone stir amid the wreckage.

It was the figure of a girl.

Consternation twisted Bradley's face as he pulled her from the ship.

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He poured out a cup of water from his canteen and held it to her lips. A small cut trickled blood down her temple and dyed the copper hair around it red. The water brought her around presently and she stared dazedly up at him.

He propped her up against the smashed hull of the rocket.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

The girl passed a hand feebly over her forehead and mechanically began to replace a number of coppery tresses that had become undone in the crash.

"Much better, thanks. I couldn't do a thing when those rockets quit!"

She got to her feet and surveyed the wreckage. "Not much left of it, is there?"

"It'll never fly again, if that's what you mean." he said.

Suddenly, as the situation began to register upon her, she stared about wildly.

"How far am I from Tellus Spaceport?"

Bradley thoughtfully replaced the cap on his canteen.

"About a hundred miles, in the middle of nowhere."

"Is it that bad?" she asked apprehensively.

"Well not quite. There's a colony about twenty miles from here: they get back to civilization pretty often."

"You mean the Farnsworth colony?" the girl asked excitedly.

"Yes." Bradley answered. "How did you know? You don't seem like a person who's been on Venus very long."

"I haven't. But that's where I was heading. You see, I'm Sharon Farnsworth."

Bradley started, nearly dropping the canteen. But the girl didn't seem to notice. She continued:

"I've always wanted to see what a colony is like, and when we received word on Earth a few days ago that something was wrong up here, well, I hopped the first liner to Tellus Spaceport. There I chartered this ship," she gazed at the twisted remains of the rocket plane, "and here I am. It's a good thing I carry heavy personal insurance!"

She paused, noting the strange look on Bradley's face. "Is there anything wrong?"

Bradley forced a smile. "No, I can't say that there is." Then he added: "Right now."

The girl looked frowningly at him. "By the way, you haven't told me who you are!"

"Haven't I?" Bradley studied his hands, his face hardening. "The name's Bradley. John Bradley."

Her eyes were uncomprehending. "I said, the name's *Bradley*."

"I heard you the first time." she answered.

BRADLEY WAS at a loss for what to do or say. He had expected anything to happen when he told her his name. That is, anything but *this*. Could it be she didn't know?

"Did that message you received on Earth say what had happened up here?" he asked, pulling a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it.

The girl frowned. "No it didn't. Do you know what it's all about?"

Bradley pulled in thoughtfully on his cigarette. She had to find out sometime anyway....

"I suppose I know as much as anyone," he said.

The girl waited expectantly Bradley leaned against the smashed metal hull of the rocket plane and flicking away his cigarette, told her in blunt words.

Amazement spread over the girl's face as Bradley unfolded the events leading up to their meeting in the

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jungle. And when he finished she remained silent for a few minutes. Then:

"You didn't do it—did you?"

"What difference does it make," Bradley snorted. "I'm branded an outcast, and as far as Venus is concerned, damned!"

"But there must be some way you can prove...."

"The only way I can prove anything is to get the real person behind this."

The girl looked steadily into his eyes. "Well?" she said.

"Well what!"

"Well, why are you running away? You won't find the person behind this in Tellus Spaceport!"

Bradley didn't answer. He couldn't. He felt the girl's steady gaze burn his face and his jaw hardened.

"I wasn't running away," he said slowly. "Although it might look like it. But I've got just enough supplies to reach Tellus Spaceport."

The girl brightened.

"If that's all you need, I can help. My rocket plane carried a full regulation supply of tablets."

It began to dawn on Bradley that the girl was urging him to return to the Farnsworth colony. And with the realization he suddenly knew something else. She believed him!

He moved away from the ship.

"Would you be willing to help me get to the bottom of this?" he asked. "Being on the inside you could keep an eye on things and let me know."

"Of course I will," she answered. Then a frown creased her forehead. "But how could I get in touch with you? If you are seen, Dad may carry out his threat."

Bradley rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"During the day I'm going to watch the Venusian camps for anything funny, but at night I could get pretty close to the stockade unseen, and if you want me you can flash a light from the west wall and sneak out through the side entrance."

"Good!" she answered. "And if anybody on the inside is responsible, I'll find out!"

Bradley smiled and turned to the wrecked ship. "I'll need those supplies you spoke of," he said, rummaging in the crushed confines of the after compartment. Finally he drew out a small metal box. The girl meanwhile stood gazing around at the borders of the dense Venusian jungle.

"It certainly is beautiful from a scenic viewpoint," she said.

Bradley lifted his head and stared about him.

"What's so beautiful about it?"

The girl pointed. "All those white flowers. What are they? They look something like the Earth poppy, only these are much larger."

Bradley nodded. "They're practically the same thing. Venus is overrun with them. But when you have to cut your way through miles of them they sort of lose their novelty."

She smiled and gathered up her things from the ground where he had put them along with the supply case.

"I suppose we had better get started."

Bradley nodded and drew his machete from his belt. Somehow the thought of cutting his way through miles of jungle didn't seem half as difficult now as it had a few hours before.

HE LAY tense in the hedges that bordered the jungle around the Farnsworth colony stockage. The night was phosphorescently lit by radioactive deposits in the mountain ranges to the north. By the diffused

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light he watched the close proximity of the colony. Three days had passed since he left Sharon Farnsworth. And in those three days he had found out many things. Foremost was the startling fact that the Venusians were being banded together for some mysterious purpose. Bradley had seen five hundred natives gathered in a single camp, and they were all armed with the latest automatic rifles.

And for three nights he had waited around the Farnsworth colony for the single flash signal from Sharon Farnsworth. But each night had passed without result.

Bradley shifted his position and for the hundreth time gazed across at the west wall of the stockade.

A ray of light suddenly sprang into being, followed by two more quick flashes. Bradley frowned amid his excitement. Why the three flashes?

And then he tensed. There was movement in the hedges to his right! Dimly he caught sight of a group of Venusians stealing toward the outer fringes at the west wall.

And then he saw something else. A figure dropped from the East wall and began to circle into the bushes toward the west! But it was a figure that made Bradley's blood chill. *That figure was dressed exactly like him!*

He suddenly knew why the guards had sworn they saw him! Whoever was behind this was taking no chances. If there was to be any slip-up the blame would fall on the outcast!

The figure disappeared into the bushes and a few minutes later reappeared opposite the west wall. Behind him the group of waiting Venusians stole out from their cover and moved in close to the Earthman. And then Bradley caught a glance at the face of the imposter.

It was Mandel Craig!

His heart pounding, Bradley watched. The figures did nothing but stay out in the open. And suddenly it became apparent to Bradley that *they wanted to be seen from the stockade!*

Almost as the thought formed in his mind a shout went up from the stockade. They had been seen. And anyone who was watching would think Bradley himself was outside with a group of Venusians!

As the shout went up Craig and the Venusians faded back into the jungle. Bradley watched them circle stealthily to the East and settle into the hedges around the East wall.

Bradley sunk lower into his retreat as a group of men stormed from the main entrance of the stockade, led by old man Farnsworth. Guns glistened in the radio-active night. Bradley dimly heard the old man's curses as he led his men into the bushes where Craig and the Venusians had been seen.

Bradley cursed softly to himself. Things were playing right into Craig's plans, whatever they were.

He half lifted himself from his hiding place to call out to the fading figures of Farnsworth and his men. But he fell back startled.

Someone else was stealing out of the stockade!

He strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of whoever it was and then his breath left his lungs in a puzzled sigh.

It was the girl—Sharon Farnsworth!

Unconsciously she was walking right into a trap. Bradley saw Craig turn suddenly and spot the girl. He heard a hoarse curse rip from his throat as he dove at her. The girl jumped backward and threw her hand to her mouth as if she were about to scream, but she was too late. Craig

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caught her and stifled the sound before it was born. Then Bradley acted.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Venusians stealing into the open gates of the stockade as he leapt forward. Dimly too he sensed movement behind him even as he sprang. But he didn't have time to turn. Something had crashed against the base of his brain and the world seemed to explode about him...

HE CAME to with the sensation of rolling against the waves of a tumultuous sea. He groaned slightly as his head cleared.

He was cradled on the shoulder of a huge Venusian. His hands hung down before him lashed at the wrists and his shirt sleeves hung open where the clasps had torn.

Bradley glanced quickly about him. The Venusian who carried him was bringing up the rear. Up front Craig was prodding forward a group of men with bound arms. Bradley barely suppressed a curse as he recognized the group Farnsworth had led into the jungle in search of Bradley and the Venusians! And beside them walked the girl.

And then Bradley saw something else. There was a dull gleam at the Venusian's waist beneath him. It was a short knife!

Slowly he eased the knife from its scabbard and turned the point upward, sliding it up into his sleeve. With one fist closed on the hilt it would remain unseen.

Minutes later they came to the Venusian camp. Bradley was prepared for what he saw.

Nearly five hundred Venusians were massed around blazing fires. Off to one side were stacked tiers of automatic rifles, and Bradley gasped as he saw a group of Venusians from the kidnapping party go over to the guns and dump nearly fifty additional weapons on the pile. His heart sank as he realized these were the guns of the colony. Craig must have sent the natives in to steal them.

On the other side of the clearing were stacked the plundered remains of the Farnsworth ore trains. He recognized the ore crates and the small hydraulic ore presses. Next to these stood great open casks of liquor.

But the sight of this wasn't what brought a gasp to Bradley's lips. It was the sight of a short, thick-set man standing on the far side of the camp.

It was Jason Brail!

And Brail smiled cruelly as the party brought up.

"The whole family—outcast and all!"

Borden Farnsworth's face was livid as he faced Brail.

"So it was you who planned all this! You—"

"That seems quite obvious," Brail cut in drily. Then he motioned to Mandel Craig who stood off to one side smiling, still dresssed as Bradley. "See that our guests are taken care of."

Bradley's jaw hardened. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"I don't think," Brail replied. "I know. There ain't room in this country for two colonies. From now on there'll be only one. Especially since the main vein of platinum seems to run directly into the Farnsworth outfit. By dawn the rest of the colony will be taken care of, and then—I'll attend to the rest of you."

The girl shook her head angrily.

"The least you could have done was to leave them their guns! You know they won't have a chance when these savages pour down on them!"

"That is the general idea," Brail agreed.

"And after it's all over," Craig

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supplied. "The outcast responsible will be handed over to the Tellus Spaceport Council."

Muscles bunched white on Jack Bradley's jaw and he almost drew the knife from his sleeve. But he caught himself in time. That could come later.

"It's easy to hide behind another man's name!" he said bitterly.

But Craig only continued to smile. And then Brail motioned to two Venusians. Bradley, the girl and old man Farnsworth were trundled into a low rambling hut. Inside, their feet were trussed. Brail and Craig looked in. Craig held a torch.

"You'll be comfortable in here for the time being," Brail smiled down on them.

THEN HE and Craig disappeared from the threshold and a huge Venusian parked in the entrance with his back slightly toward them. A rifle was slumped over one leg.

Beside Bradley, Borden Farnsworth squirmed in the darkness.

"I'm sorry, Bradley, about what's happened. Craig had me fooled..."

"Forget it," Bradley replied. "He had all of us fooled."

Somewhere in the darkness Bradley knew that the girl was crying.

Borden Farnsworth sighed heavily. "If only we could warn the colony—all those men!"

"A lot of good it would do," Bradley gritted. "Even if they were armed with cannon they couldn't stop these savages once they get that liquor out there inside them."

Bradley cursed frustratedly to himself. Dawn was only a few hours away and by that time the Venusians would be raving drunk and Brail and Craig would lead them down on the defenseless colony. Bradley closed the ensuing picture from his mind. What he foresaw was not pretty. He had seen his ore trains massacred before his eyes by these same savages.

His hands gripped the short keen blade in the dark, his mind speeding quickly over the possibilities. He could cut their bonds and dispose of the guard at the door—but then what? There was no way he could stop hundreds of raving Venusians maddened by drink! Or was there..... Bradley's mind whipped back to a scene two days previous when he and the girl were standing in the jungle. For Bradley suddenly remembered something. Something that caused his pulse to leap.

He slashed at his bonds with the knife, watching the shadowed figure at the door out of the corner of his eyes as he did so. His wrists parted and he hacked the bonds from his legs. Beside him the girl and old Farnsworth sensed his movements and he heard their quick, indrawn breaths.

Then he slipped the knife beneath their bonds and slashed them. They were free.

"Quiet!" he whispered, and pressed the girl's hand reassuringly. Then he crept silently toward the door where the Venusian guard was intent in watching the preparations going on at the far side of the clearing. Bradley drew his arm back. The Venusian, sensing movement behind him, turned but too late. The cry that welled upon his lips died unborn. For the knife was suddenly buried deep in his throat.

With a rumbling rattle he slumped forward and Bradley felt warm blood flow down over his arm. Hastily he withdrew his knife and propped the dead Venusian up against the door. To any but a close scrunity it would

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seem he were still on guard.

He felt the girl and Borden Farnsworth edge up close beside him. He gripped the girl's hand in the dark.

"We've got one chance in a million of getting out of here," he said slowly. "And we've got an even smaller chance of stopping Brail and Craig. Ive got a wild idea that's worth a chance. But I've got to chance it alone. You can help best by staying here under cover." He passed the Venusian's rifle to the elder Farnsworth.

Mingling with the dense shadows around the doorway, Bradley stole from the hut. For a moment he surveyed the surrounding gloom. Dimly he made out Brail and Craig distributing guns to the crowded Venusians on the far side of the clearing. The glint of steel shone even in the dull glow of the radio-active night.

Then Bradley saw what he was looking for. Softly he stole into the shadows and circled the clearing. He came up beside the piled remains of the Farnsworth ore trains. Risking detection, Bradley slunk forward and pulled a small rollered machine into the shadows. Then he faded into the jungle....

BRAIL looked at his watch.

"One hour till dawn," he muttered.

Beside him Craig grunted. "Those savages are drunker than I've ever seen them. They've emptied every last cask!"

"So what?" Brail snorted. "Liquor's cheap enough. You better get Grakh. It's about time he rounded up these devils. It'll take an hour to reach Farnsworth's colony. And we can't take a chance on any of them getting away."

Craig nodded and turned into the wildly milling savages. He searched their ranks until he found a towering Venusian, swaying drunkenly on his feet and clutching an automatic rifle in one taloned hand. Craig walked up to him and broke into the harsh Venusian tongue.

"Get your men together, Grakh. We're heading for the colony."

The Venusian stared stupidly at Craig and Craig noticed that the pupils of his eyes were much larger than usual.

"I said," Craig snapped, "get your outfit together, we're marching!"

But Grakh sat down.

Craig broke into a volley of curses. Around him Venusians were falling to the ground, voicing unintelligible phrases to themselves and with glassy stares in their eyes. Craig kicked the huge Venusian before him.

"What the devil's the matter with you!"

But Grakh's eyes stared sleepily up at him and he didn't move. Jason Brail came running up.

"What's happened?"

Craig ran his eyes over the clearing where hundreds of Venusians were slumping to the ground in trance-like stupors.

"I don't know!" he snapped. "There is something funny..."

And then his eyes hardened. Out of the jungle hurtled a figure. It was Jack Bradley, a knife in his hand. Craig stooped and grasped a rifle from the arms of a prone Venusian. But he never fired it.

Bradley's arm flashed back and the knife flew from his fingers. Craig gasped and fell backward, the gun falling from his hands. Spasmodically he clutched at the hilt protruding from his chest. Then he sank forward to the ground, a red froth welling from his lips.

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Jason Brail dove on the gun Craig had dropped. But Bradley was upon him as his fingers touched the butt. A smashing fist drove Brail's head back and he fell to his knees. Bradley dove on him and snapped a hard right to his jaw. Brail sagged forward limply.

Behind him, Bradley heard a slight scraping sound. He turned and found himself facing the herd end of an automatic rifle. One of Brail's men had his finger around the trigger. There was a loud crack. But not from the gun facing Bradley. The man slumped forward clutching at his chest. And from behind, Bradley heard old man Farnsworth curse. He and Sharon came running up. The old man's gun was smoking.

BORDEN Farnsworth's face was a a wreath of smiles. His hand went out and gripped Jack Bradley's hard. Beside him Sharon Farnsworth's eyes were brightly lit.

Then a frown creased the old man's face.

"I can understand everything that's happened, Bradley, except how you licked these natives. They look like a plague struck them!"

He stared around the camp at the prone figures of the Venusians. Around him the rest of the men from the colony were taking possession of the guns.

"It was a wild hunch," Bradley explained, "but it worked. You see I remembered that Venus is overrun with those white poppy flowers, similar to the Earth genus. Sharon remarked about them a few days ago and that was what gave me the idea. On Earth the juice of the poppy is used as a drug—opium. When I left the hut I circled the camp and stole one of the hydraulic ore presses and loaded it with those flowers. When the presses got through with it I simply mixed the juice in with the liquor casks while Brail and Craig were still handing out guns. After a few additions, that liquor was a poppy eater's paradise! And when the Venusians got enough of the stuff in them they passed out!"

Borden Farnsworth's face showed him astonishment. Then, as he suddenly turned to the trussed figure of Jason Brail, Farnsworth's voice cut like a knife.

"I made a mistake—and I admit it. There was an outcast—but it wasn't Bradley—it was you, Brail! And there won't be any mistake about that when I get you to Tellus Spaceport. I'm only sorry that you didn't get a good load of that stuff inside you like the natives did. —But you'll have as good a hangover at the end of a rope!"

Bradley let a smile tug at the corners of his mouth as his arm tightened about the girl.

"Speaking of hangovers," he said, "this is one binge the Venusians around here will never forget!"

MOONSTONE MYSTERY

ONE OF the most prized gems in India is the silvery-white moonstone. To it superstitious peoples have attributed many powers. Because the stone itself possesses a luminous quality, a moving inner light, it is supposed in the East that a living spirit dwells within, a spirit potent for good.

The moonlike inner light changes on the surface as the light in which it is viewed changes. This is due to a reflection caused by certain cleavage planes in feldspar of the variety to which Moonstone belongs. Light gleams from beneath its surface in a band of soft sheen that fades almost imperceptibly into pearly shadow. There are no sharp definite edges to the highlight on the moonstone. This absence of sharp clevage between light and shadow is what gives the gem its serene, mysterious beauty.

Robert Marlin

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(*Concluded from page 45*)

Several months after his safe return to earth, scientists announced the successful construction of an atomic energy motor. This resulted in the abandonment of rocket-propelled ships, and in the installation of atomotors in all space cruisers. The emergency refueling station was no longer needed.

The projectiles from Vesta? The few that escaped—if any did—must have fled back to their own world. An expedition that visited the asteroid with the intention of destroying its life, returned with its mission unaccomplished. They decided that to blot out the worm-beings would have been an unnecessary cruelty. They were not hostile to their visitors; and because of their minute size, they could hardly constitute a menace to anyone on Earth, Venus, or Mars. They had probably considered the buildings on Ceres to be an encroachment upon their own group of worlds—and had resented it.

Larry Damore? At first they made him an astro-technician, because of his interest in astronomy. But eventually he became a power in commercial space travel—H. C. MacDonald's assistant. After all, as the son-in-law of the big boss, he deserved *some* consideration.

THE END

THE JUSTICE OF TOR

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30)

heading toward him.

"Until now, Zaney," Bea-Anna said. "It had to be genuine, springing spontaneously from my heart. Otherwise it wouldn't activate the relays that would open my prison. I—I couldn't fake it or create it by wish fulfillment."

The ship came to rest on the rocky surface a hundred feet away. As Zaney started toward it a door swung open revealing the small cubicle of an airlock.

"Before you come in, Zaney—" Bea-Anna hesitated, embarrassed.

"Yes, Bea-Anna?" Zaney said, feeling himself trembling now that the undreamable moment was about to arrive when he would stand face to face with this woman he had come to love.

"Will you—will you call me that nice name, and promise to always call me by it?" Bea-Anna said shyly. "It—it's what made me fall in love with you, among other things."

"Huh?" Zaney said blankly. "What did I call you?" He stopped, puzzled.

Suddenly a light dawned on him. His bearded face creased into a wide smile under his glassite helmet. Then, slowly, his expression softened.

"Damn woman," he muttered tenderly.

THE END

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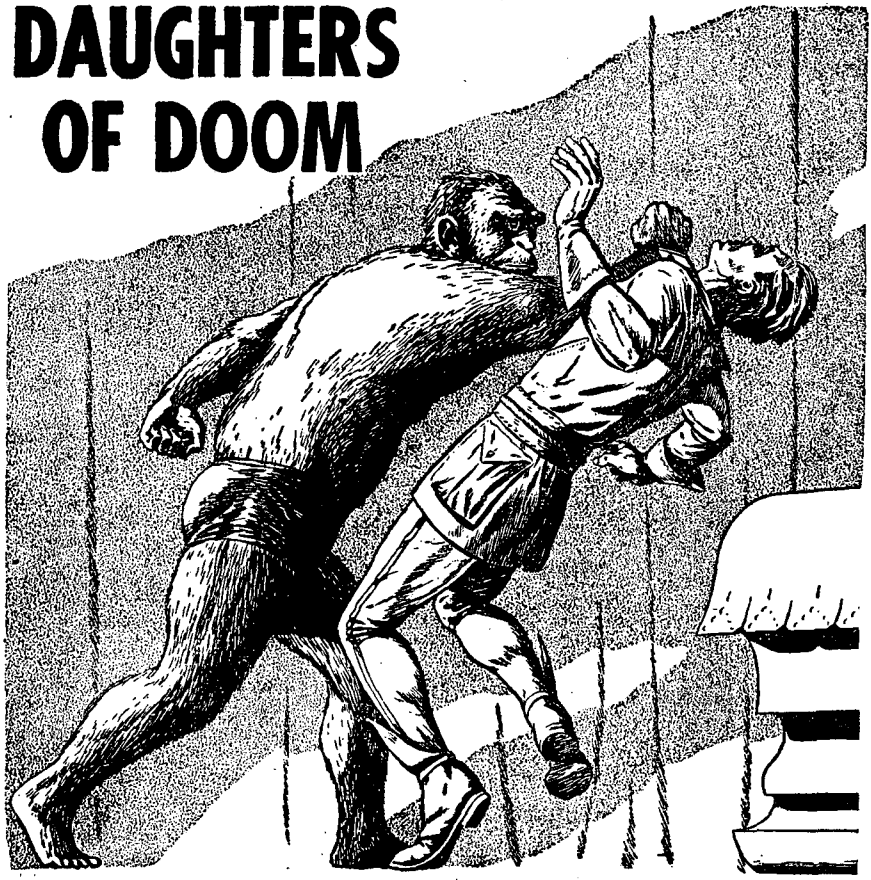
DAUGHTERS OF DOOM



By H. B. HICKEY

Deep in space lay a weird and threatening world. And it was there that Ben Sessions found the evil daughters . . .

BEYOND Ventura B there was no life; there was nothing but one worn out sun after another, each with its retinue of cold planets and its trail of dark asteroids. At least that was what the books showed, and the books had been written by men who knew their business. Yet, despite the books

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and the men who had written them, Ben Sessions went past Ventura B, deliberately and all alone and knowing that the odds were against his returning alive.

He went because of a file clerk's error. More correctly, he went as the final result of a chain of events which had begun with the clerk's mistake.

The clerk's name was Gilbert Wayne and he worked at the Las Vegas Interplanetary Port. It was Wayne's job to put through the orders for routine overhaul of interplanetary rockets. Usually Wayne was quite efficient, but even efficient men have bad days, and on one of those days Wayne had removed from the active list the name of Astra instead of its sister ship, the Storan.

The very next morning the Astra had been turned over to Maintenance. Maintenance asked no questions. It was that department's job to take the ship apart, fix what needed fixing, and put it. Ten minutes later Jacobs saw Ar-

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mando Gomez was the mechanic detailed to check the rocket tubes.

Gomez, who always got that job because he was small and slender, dutifully dropped his instruments into his overall pockets and crawled into the left firing tube. Half an hour later he stuck his head out of the tube and yelled to Jacobs, who was in charge of the job:

"Amigo! How many hours this ship she got?"

Jacobs ran his finger down a chart and discovered to his surprise that the Astra had only two hundred hours on its log since the last overhaul. Ordinarily a ship was checked each thousand hours. He scratched his head but decided that if Operations wanted the Astra tuned it was none of his business. So he told Gomez not to ask useless questions and to get back in the tube.

Anyone else but Gomez would have obeyed orders and forgotten all about it. Ten minutes later Jacobs saw Armando's head appear.

"Amigo!" Gomez shouted. "How many hours?"

"Two hundred!" Jacobs shouted back, knowing he would have no peace until Gomez was answered. "Now get to work! We ain't got all year."

But Gomez was out of the tube again in five minutes and yelling for the foreman.

"What do you want now?" Jacobs demanded. He swung himself up on the catwalk beside Gomez.

"Something very funny in here, amigo," Gomez replied. "One plate she is too clean."

"Less work for you," Jacobs grunted. "So why complain?"

Nevertheless he took a look at the plate, which was near the mouth of the tube. It should have been lightly encrusted with the oxides of rocket fuel. Instead, it was only beginning to dull, in strange contrast to its neighbors which were welded to it.

"That is queer," Jacobs muttered.

"*Si.* As you say, amigo. Queer."

Once Jacob's interest was aroused he was also not one to let a matter drop; he told Gomez to work on another tube while he consulted the front office. The front office was not especially interested, but at Jacobs' insistence they called in a metallurgist. The metallurgist, whose name was Britton, was fortunately a thorough young man. He ordered the plate removed and sent to his laboratory for complete analysis.

After that things happened fast. Britton scanned the analysis of the plate and without hesitation called in his superior who ordered a second test just to be safe, and then notified Washington. Washington turned it over to Interplanetary Intelligence, of which Carson was chief of staff.

One week later Ben Sessions stood before Carson's desk.

SESSIONS was only thirty-five, but in his few years with "Two Eyes," as the organization was known, he had rung up an enviable record. Tall, lithe, darkly handsome, he was well liked by the men who worked with him. At the moment there was a puzzled frown on his face, lengthening the line made by a scar which ran from his forehead down the side of his nose. The scar was the result of a crash landing on Neptune.

"I don't get it, sir," he said. "A single plate from a rocket tube . . . So what if it didn't oxidize?"

"That makes me feel much better." Carson smiled, an inner bitterness making the smile wry. "I didn't get it either," he went on. "A mechanic named Gomez got it; a foreman named Jacobs got it; a lab man named Britton got it; but the chief of "Two Eyes"

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missed the boat. I feel swell about that." He rose suddenly and hammered his fist on the desk. "Every one of us in Intelligence ought to be cashiered!"

"Take it easy," Ben cautioned. "All because of that plate?"

Carson slumped back into his chair. "Yes. And because we have failed in our duty. Our only hope is that we may have time to make it up. I'll give you the facts:

"Those tubes are made of Virium, but even Virium develops scale. After next week it will develop even more, because next week we make the change-over to the new fuel. If Wayne had made his mistake two weeks later there would have been so much deposit in the tubes that Gomez would not have noticed the difference.

"Now, Virium is one of the most standardized products in the world. So Gomez was rightly astonished that the tube didn't oxidize evenly. Jacobs saw further. Virium is the toughest metal we know of; if this piece was tougher it might be a discovery of major importance. So Britton analyzed the plate."

"Now we get to the point," Sessions grinned.

Carson stabbed a finger at him. "Right. And the point is that this one section of plate is not Virium! In fact, it is a substance which we are positive does not exist in our system!"

"Wait a second. What do you mean by 'system'?"

"I mean every single bit of matter that lies between here and Ventura B."

"Maybe it's not a natural substance. Not an element."

"We thought of that. It's an element, and one we know nothing of."

"Do you mind if I sit down, sir?" Ben asked suddenly.

The enormity of the thing had struck him, almost dazzling him with its implications. Carson laughed bitterly and waved him to a chair, then went on talking.

"Precisely, Ben. The question is: How did this strange substance get into the tube of an Interplanetary rocket called the Astra? To answer that we checked on the ship. The Astra is one of the few ships which have ever gone beyond Ventura B!"

"I almost expected to hear that," Sessions said.

"It adds up, all right, doesn't it? A foreign substance, a foreign system. But this substance had been made into a plate. That means the work of intelligent beings."

"Who took the Astra on that trip?" Sessions asked, his body tense.

"A licensed space explorer named Murchison. Two others went with him but he returned alone. Claims they fell into a chasm."

"But no explorer has reported life beyond Ventura B," Sessions said, taking up the thread of thought. He whistled softly. "You must have been busy this last week."

"Busy is no word for it. It's only three years since anyone has been allowed to go outside our system. For the purpose of science Interstellar Flight granted permits to six licensed explorers. All returned with charts showing only a desolate waste. In our own quiet way we have checked on each of these six men, including Murchison, in the last week."

"And. . . ?"

"And we discovered something very interesting. The six who returned from beyond Ventura B were not the same six who went! They are identical in every facial, bodily, and mental characteristic, identical enough to fool even the families of the lost explorers. But when we secretly photographed them with infra-red light we found that their

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skins contained elements foreign to our system!"

VENTURA A and its sister star were the twin beacons that marked the last outposts of the Earth System. Past them was only a trackless waste of inter-stellar space. Ben Sessions knew that the charts he carried were probably worse than useless, were likely downright traps.

He and Carson had planned the trip. Carson had wanted to send a fighting fleet but Ben had opposed the idea. Wayne's mistake had led them to the uncovering of a gigantic hoax, a hoax which could have only a sinister purpose. Somewhere in the void ahead were sentient beings. To send a fleet would be to let them know that their existence was suspected.

Sessions let the automatic controls take over while he examined the charts once more. They showed the constellation which lay directly ahead, the one after that, and then nothing for hundreds of millions of miles. Those first two reflected a tiny amount of light from Ventura B and were visible through telescopes, therefore it would have created suspicion to falsify their position. Past them, however, the blackness was too intense to penetrate.

The speed of the rocket ship increased. Atomic blasts replaced those of the regular fuel. Sessions knew that an Earth measurement would have shown the ship to have shrunk to half its size. Only light and the radona beam which protected the ship from collisions could travel faster.

From now on it was just a matter of luck. Someone had pulled those six explorers out of space and Sessions was hoping the same thing would happen to him. On the third day it happened.

He was sitting in the pilot's chair, watching the radona chart before him. Most of the chart was blank, only the upper right hand corner showing a mass of black dots which indicated a planetary dispersal about a dead star. Sessions waited for the radona beam to swing the ship leftward.

Instead, the ship was curving in the direction of the dots! Ben's first thought was that the beam had gone out of order, and he switched to manual controls. No use. Despite all his efforts he was being carried toward those planets.

Habit made him shut off the tubes. Why waste fuel? A tight smile froze on his lips as his speed dropped to twenty million miles then lifted again as the ship by-passed a planet. With calm deliberation Ben switched on the camera he had installed before the flight and let it record his course as shown on the radona chart.

Only one dot remained on the chart. It grew larger and larger until it filled the entire screen. There was no longer any doubt as to the ship's destination, and as if to add further proof its speed dropped sharply. Ben clicked the switch on the camera and removed a tiny roll of microfilm. The roll fit snugly into the hollow cap which covered the stub of one of his molars.

The altitude indicator went on automatically, showed fifty thousand feet, then forty thousand, went down to hundreds. Ahead there was only blackness. Ben held his breath and waited for the crash. It never came. Long after the altimeter showed zero the ship still moved. Ben could think of only one explanation: he was below the surface of the dark planet! And then he could think no more; the blackness seemed to filter into the ship and into his mind.

"HE AWAKENS," a voice said. It was a pleasant voice, a feminine

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one, silky and soothing.

Ben Sessions sat up and said, "Huh?"

The first thing he noticed was the light. No more darkness, but a light that came from nowhere and yet was everywhere. He was on some sort of couch, in a huge room with a vaulted ceiling. Shaking his head groggily, Ben looked for the source of the silken voice. He was alone in the room.

His eyes ran down the length of his body. The flash gun was gone from his belt. That was hardly unexpected. But the belt was gone too. So were his clothes. He was clad in a loose robe of shimmering white cloth.

That meant he had been unconscious for some time. How long? Ben would have given much to know. Suddenly he let out an unearthly moan, threw his arms wide and rolled off the couch. He lay still.

The silken voice was raised again and added to it was another, more masculine. Then a door opened and two people stepped into the room. Ben sat up and grinned at them, especially at the woman.

"I thought that would get you," he said. "It's not hospitable to hide from your guest."

"Resourceful, isn't he?" The woman raised her eyebrows in mock admiration. Her companion growled a reply which Ben couldn't quite catch.

They were an odd pair, the woman towering well above ten feet but perfectly formed, her skin the color of pink marble; the man more beast than human. The women of Saturn were as tall as she, Ben had time to think, but not nearly as beautiful.

"Welcome to Teris, Ben Sessions," she said. Her smile was the smile of the serpent of Eden.

"You're pretty resourceful yourself," Ben grinned.

He had carried no papers except a blanket permit from Interstellar Flight. He wondered if the precaution he and Carson had taken would prove to be in vain. The woman spoke again.

"Ben Sessions, graduate of Neptune School of Rockets; born in Taos, New Mexico, Earth; third of four children; unmarried, unattached at present; first position, co-pilot Earth-Vega Express . . ."

She seemed to be choosing items at random from a memorized list. The exhibition was intended to impress Ben and it was succeeding. More than that, however, it was frightening. He held his breath as she neared the end.

". . . two years with Interstellar Communications; presently a licensed space explorer, non-affiliated."

"Pretty good," Ben said.

It was better than that. It was perfect. Only the end was wrong. He and Carson had worked that out with the psychoanalyst. The two of them had wanted to falsify the entire biography, but the analyst had convinced them he was right.

"One lie I might attempt to pound into your very subconscious by hypnotism; a dozen would be spread too thin. We would leave holes. Under the type of electroanalysis you seem to think might be used on you I can't even promise one lie will hold up."

Ben reminded himself to recommend the man for honors if he ever got back to Earth. He had certainly known his business; but then, if he hadn't he would not be working for "Two Eyes."

"Now that you've told me all about myself maybe you'll tell me what's going on," Ben said.

"One of your compatriots can do that," the woman told him. Her interest seemed suddenly to have waned.

She said a few words in a strange tongue to the man who stood at her

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side. He grunted, bowed, and advanced toward Ben. Long arms, covered with thick black hair, reached out. Ben dodged.

"You'll be sorry if you make him use force," the woman said.

"Nothing like trying," Ben told her. He avoided another grab and stepped in and smashed his fist to the hairy man's jaw.

He might as well have hit a wall. Before Ben could strike another blow he was lifted from his feet by an upward slap that threatened to tear loose one side of his face. Too dazed to resist, he felt both his wrists encircled by a tremendous hand. The woman's voice rose sharply in a tone of command.

THE CORRIDOR through which Ben Sessions was being led was thronged with people. There seemed to be three classes: rosy-skinned giantesses like his escort; men of his own size, but also with pink complexions; and the squat, hairy men who appeared to be nothing more than slaves.

It was plain that women dominated this society, and from them Ben received curious but contemptuous glances. Any one of these Amazons would have been considered a beauty on Earth, so regular were their features, but they lacked an air of feminine softness. Instead, cruelty lay thinly masked beneath the surface.

At the end of the long corridor a huge door swung open and Ben was led through it into an immense room. At the far end of the room was a throne, and on it a woman. Ben blinked. As well proportioned as the others he had seen, she was half again as tall, twice as beautiful. He could not contain a gasp of appreciation.

Thick violet hair fell almost to her shoulders, her skin was luminous and flawless, her body breathtaking, more revealed than concealed by a clinging gown of some filmy material. At her breast, flashed a single violet jewel larger by far than the famed sapphires of Uranus.

"I brought him as soon as he awakened," said the woman with Ben.

A malevolent stare from the woman on the throne rested on Ben. "It was unnecessary," she said. "We have no further need of him. Take him to the field."

"Wait a minute," Ben snapped.

"You are addressing Arndis, Queen of Teris," he heard his escort say.

"I don't give a hoot . . ." He never finished the sentence. From behind the hairy slave seized him, lifted him and flung him bodily toward the doors. The interview was over.

They went for a while along the same corridor, then turned off and followed a side passage for a way. It led steadily downward to an arched opening and through that out of the building. Here too the light was diffused, but much brighter. Ben had to blink several times before he became adjusted to it.

They were standing in the center of a vast level plain, apparently endless and roofless, for overhead there was no sky, only an increasing intensity of light. Ranged in rows on the plain were thousands of space ships. Ben turned once as they approached the first line of ships and saw behind him the building from which he had just come. It rose upward, a single block of shining stone, for almost a mile. Alongside it were other buildings of the same material, but none so large.

Then Ben and his two escorts were past the first rows of ships. His eyes roved over them, trying to discover what armament they carried. None was visible. Their firing tubes were much the same as those of Earth de-

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sign, but slightly smaller.

His attention was diverted from his study by a sudden disturbance aboard the closest ship. The sound of an angry feminine voice came clearly through an open porthole, and mingled with it was a pleading, deeper tone. An instant later a door was flung open and out of it came hurtling one of the men of Teris. He hit the ground, rolled over, and came to his knees facing the open door and the giant woman who stood framed in it.

THAT the man was pleading for his very life was obvious to Ben, but it was equally plain that his pleas were having no effect. The woman on the ship uttered a single contemptuous word that cut the pleas short. On her face was a sadistic anticipation such as Ben had never before seen. Slowly she raised a cylinder in her hand and pointed it at the man on the ground.

From the cylinder came a violet light, weak at first, but growing in intensity as she pressed some sort of trigger. The man shrieked in agony as the light played on him. Then the smell of burning flesh came to Ben's nostrils, and the shriek became a single high pitched scream which choked off suddenly.

Ben's escort laughed with ghoulish enjoyment, said something to the woman in the doorway, and gestured at the charred body on the ground. The violet light grew to blinding intensity. A puff of smoke and the body was gone.

"What was that for?" Ben gasped.

His escort smiled indulgently and shot a question at the other woman. The reply was a shrug of shoulders and a few short syllables.

"He did something that displeased her," she told Ben. At his look of horror she laughed again, apparently pleased to have shocked him.

He noticed, as they went along, that the space ships decreased in size. Those in the first rows had been comparable to Earth's battle cruisers, those in the last were one or two man jobs. His own ship, the *Rapier*, was at the very end of the last line.

Beyond was a vast army of men, both rosy skinned and hairy, at work on a gigantic excavation project. Great power shovels scooped load after load of earth. But most of the work was being done by the men who labored with primitive pick and shovel.

Above the sound of digging rose the sharp voices of the giant women of Teris, each with a battalion under her command. As far as Ben's eyes could reach men were digging at the ground.

He was hustling along to a point where a dirt spattered group struggled with a metallic lining for the half-mile hole it had excavated. At that point his escort turned him over to the woman who bossed that crew. Ben saw in the hand of the overseer one of the violet ray cylinders.

"Down there," she said curtly, pointing to where a small knot of men worked on a terrace fifty feet below. "They will tell you what to do."

Ben had found nothing strange in the fact that his escort had spoken English fluently. She had been present at his electroanalysis. But he doubted that all the women of Teris could have the same command of the language. Nevertheless he said nothing and clambered down the ladder to the terrace beneath. Ben's unasked question was answered when he saw the five faces turned up toward him.

EARTH men! Even the grime that covered them could not hide that. And there was added proof in their widening eyes. They were sorry to see another Earth man captive, yet happy at sight of one of their own kind. Will-

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ing hands helped Ben down from the bottom rung of the ladder.

"We'd heard they had picked up another ship," one of the men said. "But we weren't sure the rumor was true."

"True enough, as you can see. I'm Ben Sessions."

His outstretched hand was grasped and shaken cordially. Names were flung at him. Murchison, Davies, Kennard, Bannon, Murchison.

"Wait a second," Ben said. "I thought I heard Murchison twice."

"You did," said the big, rawboned man at whom he was staring. "The first is my daughter Sally."

It was only then that Ben noticed how small and slender was the figure of the one next to Murchison. Even the girl's loose robe, similar to that of the men, could not quite conceal her femininity. Her hair was cut short, her hands toil hardened.

"Carson didn't tell me," Ben muttered. He grinned at Murchison. "I expected to find you and two assistants, but I didn't know one would be your daughter."

"Expected—?" Hope glinted in five pairs of eyes. Above them there was a shouted command to get to work, and a cylinder was waved threateningly.

"I'll explain as we go along," Ben said hastily. "Show me what to do."

Bannon, a short, thickset man with a mop of unruly black hair shoved a pair of tongs into Ben's hands and quickly explained how to hold the rivets with which the group was working. In effect they were constructing a huge cylinder. Looking down, Ben saw that it descended into the bowels of Teris.

The others were pressing Ben for his explanation but he insisted that they tell their stories first. The same thing had happened to them as to him. Within some thousands of miles of Teris they had felt a force pull them toward it. Then they had passed out and awakened to find themselves prisoners.

"I know all that," Ben said. "But in all the time you've been here you must have found out a good deal. What goes on here? Why are they taking prisoner every one who approaches the planet? Why do they conceal its existence from our system?"

Murchison paused between blows of his hammer, as though to wipe sweat from his brow.

"Since you seem in a hurry," he said, "I will tell it in brief. You are in the center of a planet whose evil people are engaged in one enterprise: the conquering and subjugating of our universe."

"I thought that might be it," Ben nodded. "But subjugating billions of people may prove tougher than they think."

"Their intention is to reduce our population so it can be easily handled. And I can assure you that these women are perfectly capable of slaughtering as many people as they think necessary. They have both the means and the contempt for human life that such an undertaking requires."

Ben hazarded a guess. "This project is part of their preparation?"

"The final part. Since the surface of Teris has a temperature of absolute zero it can only be reached from here through a series of locks. What they are building now are new locks big enough to handle their largest ships. As soon as that's done they plan to attack."

"Any idea when that will be?"

"About a week, Earth time." Murchison's shoulders sagged with despair. "We've been wracking our brains for a way to stop them, but it's no use. They're as clever as they are evil. They've even sent doubles of each of us men to Earth to pave the way for the

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attack. I suppose you've seen your double."

"No."

"Then they haven't made one. You have to be awake while it's being done. I suppose they didn't think it necessary now that there's so little time left."

"Less time than I thought," Ben grunted. "I'd better get moving." He tilted his head back and shouted to the woman above.

FOR A second time Ben stood before Arndis, queen of Teris. Her eyes probed at him, trying to divine his thoughts. There was anger in those eyes. If she detected a single flaw in his story it would mean Ben's death. More than that, it would mean disaster for Earth. He talked fast.

"When we found that plate in the firing tube of Murchison's ship we knew he was lying. We figured he'd discovered valuable deposits out here and was trying to keep them secret."

"That was all?"

"It's enough, isn't it? Enough for Interplanetary Intelligence to send me on this mission. Those false papers I carried are proof that we suspected something. And if I'm not back in the time we allowed they'll have our entire battle fleet out looking for me."

"Very clever," Arndis smiled. "But if you are trying to frighten us you are failing. The women of Teris had a high civilization before your Earth was born. We can do things you never dreamed of."

At her command Ben's arms were seized and bound behind him. He was carried swiftly into a room nearby, a room filled with a maze of scientific apparatus. On what appeared to be an operating table was a transparent shell, and beneath this Ben was strapped.

Through the shell he saw one of the men of Teris brought into the room and placed in a similar position on another table. Wires were strung between the two shells and somewhere a machine began to hum. The shells filled with a white vapor that lingered a moment and then was gone.

Although he had known what was to happen Ben could not control his amazement. For the man who came out of the other shell was an exact replica of himself! Within minutes he saw the other dressed in his own flying suit.

"You see how simply we solve the problem?" Arndis asked. "Ben Sessions will return to Earth and there will be no search. He will report that he found nothing and request that he be allowed to try again. By that time we shall be ready to attack."

Ben's arms had been untied, and now he put his hand to his face, as though to rub some tender spot. The move attracted no undue attention. An instant later he had two fingers inside his mouth and was working loose the cap over his tooth.

His next move took them completely by surprise. With a leap he was half way across the room and lunging for his double. Ben brought the man down with a flying tackle and for seconds they wrestled on the floor. Then a hairy hand tore Ben loose and he was hauled to his feet. He had done little harm to the other.

"Not quite fast enough," Arndis said. "Within minutes he will be aboard the Rapier and on his way." Her voice rose. "Take this one back to the locks."

"DOESN'T it ever get dark here?" Ben asked.

He and Murchison and the others had been allowed to come out of the tube after what seemed hours of toil. They sat now in a tiny cell into which air came through slits in the wall.

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"No," Murchison said. "But Bannon has a good watch and we're able to keep track of time. It's exactly six days and three hours since you were put to work."

Ben nodded thoughtfully. There was not much time left. Work on the locks went on endlessly, and sooner than he could have believed possible they were being completed. Given enough slaves, he thought, anything could be accomplished.

Gluing his eyes to one of the slits, he peered out. The last of the giant gates was being installed. Their own crew would have only one more shift before the job was finished.

Beyond the excavation Ben could see the tower from which the locks were controlled. Bannon, who had been in Teris longest and who had managed to garner some information, had explained their operation to Ben.

"I worked on the new controls when they were being installed," he said, ranging himself alongside Ben. "They're fully automatic. There are five locks in each tube between the interior and the surface of Teris."

"How many ships did you say were kept at the tower?" Ben asked.

"About ten. They make inspection flights each day, although nothing has ever gone wrong that I've heard of. But the tubes and the locks are the only outlets to the surface and they watch them carefully."

"What are our chances of getting to the tower?"

"Zero, I should say. Only the women are allowed to enter it, or a small crew under their supervision."

"Willing to make a try?" Ben asked. He swung around to face them all. Until now he had not taken them into his confidence, given them no inkling of what was in his mind.

"We've talked about it before," Murchison answered. "But there's so little chance we gave up the idea. Better to stay alive and hope for a rescue."

"I can't tell you how I know," Ben told them, "but there isn't going to be any rescue." He kept his eyes on the girl. "How about you, Sally? Willing to trust me?"

She nodded and Ben heaved a sigh of relief. Rather than leave her behind he would have stayed with her. Gathering them about him he outlined his plans. The men were more than skeptical but no one had any suggestions.

BEN and Davies were the last to finish their work, and as they fastened the last rivet to the last hinge Ben looked up and shook his head. To the giant woman who stood watching him it seemed only that he was tired. She failed to notice that Sally had drifted off to one side and was coming up behind her.

Sally's foot suddenly caught the overseer just behind one knee and knocked her off balance. At the same instant Ben stepped in close and wrenched the violet ray cylinder from the woman's hand. The others screened them from sight. Ben looked around and saw that the slight flurry of activity had gone unnoticed by others of the giant women who were nearby.

"We're going to walk to the control tower," he told the woman grimly. "If anyone asks you're to say we have to do some work there. I'm going to have this ray gun trained on you under my robe, so don't try any tricks. Understand?"

She understood all too well. A flicker of fear in her eyes told Ben that she knew he would blast her without mercy. They fell in behind her.

When they reached the doors of the tower a pair of women barred their

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way.

"We have received no notice of work to be done," one of them said. Ben saw her eyes narrow with sudden suspicion, and then her hand darted for the cylinder at her side.

Ben's ray gun spouted violet death and the charred bodies of three women lay in the doorway. Ben scooped up their guns and thrust them at Bannon and Murchison.

"We'll give you five minutes before we take off," he shouted as they ran past him for the control room.

Behind him and Davies and Sally there were shouts as the two men went into action. But they had their own job to do. The closest inspection ship was several hundred feet away and already women were running to cut them off. Ben cut loose with his cylinder before they had a chance to use theirs.

Then he and Davies were lifting Sally into the ship. While they covered the open door Ben ran for the controls. Somewhere an alarm was wailing and as he swung the ship about Ben saw other ships being boarded. But Bannon and Murchison had not failed. Just beyond the tower a lock swung open.

Ben skimmed along the ground, figuring to pick up the two men as they came out of the tower. Then he saw Murchison wave him on. He had planted himself in the doorway and was refusing to budge. Ben saw why as Murchison blasted away at a group of giant women who were trying to rush the tower.

There was no more time. Already other ships were taking off. Another wasted minute and they would beat him to the lock. Ben yelled to Davies to close the hatch as he turned on the power.

A moment later they were in the blackness of the tube. Davies ran forward to the controls. "There's a light on the ship," he said. He found the switch and threw it in time for them to see the next lock open for them.

"Three to go," Ben muttered. "Looks like we're going to make it."

"Maybe not." Davies tapped his shoulder and pointed to the rear of the ship. Looking back through a porthole, Ben could see other ships behind them.

"As long as we're in the tube they won't fire," Davies said. "But neither can we get very far ahead!"

While he spoke the ship had gone through another lock with the others still directly behind. It looked like Davies was right. But Ben was not yet ready to concede defeat. The fourth lock loomed ahead and he watched it swing open. Just a few minutes more and they would go through the last one. It was still hundreds of miles ahead but at the rate they were travelling they would be on it soon.

He waited until the last possible second and then cut his speed sharply. Behind them the other ships were forced to use their retarding rockets for fear of ramming them. It was just what Ben had expected. As the last lock opened he threw the accelerator all the way forward and felt the ship leap ahead.

That alone would not have been enough, but as the ship roared out of the tube above the surface of Teris he cut sharply to the right. Had their ship been faster it might have worked. But it was not fast enough. Through the blackness of space the exhausts of their pursuers flamed closer. Ben's teeth clamped down on his lips.

"I guess we're out of luck."

There was nothing more to say. It was only a matter of minutes before the guns of the ships behind them would blast them to pieces. They held their

(*Concluded on page* 111)

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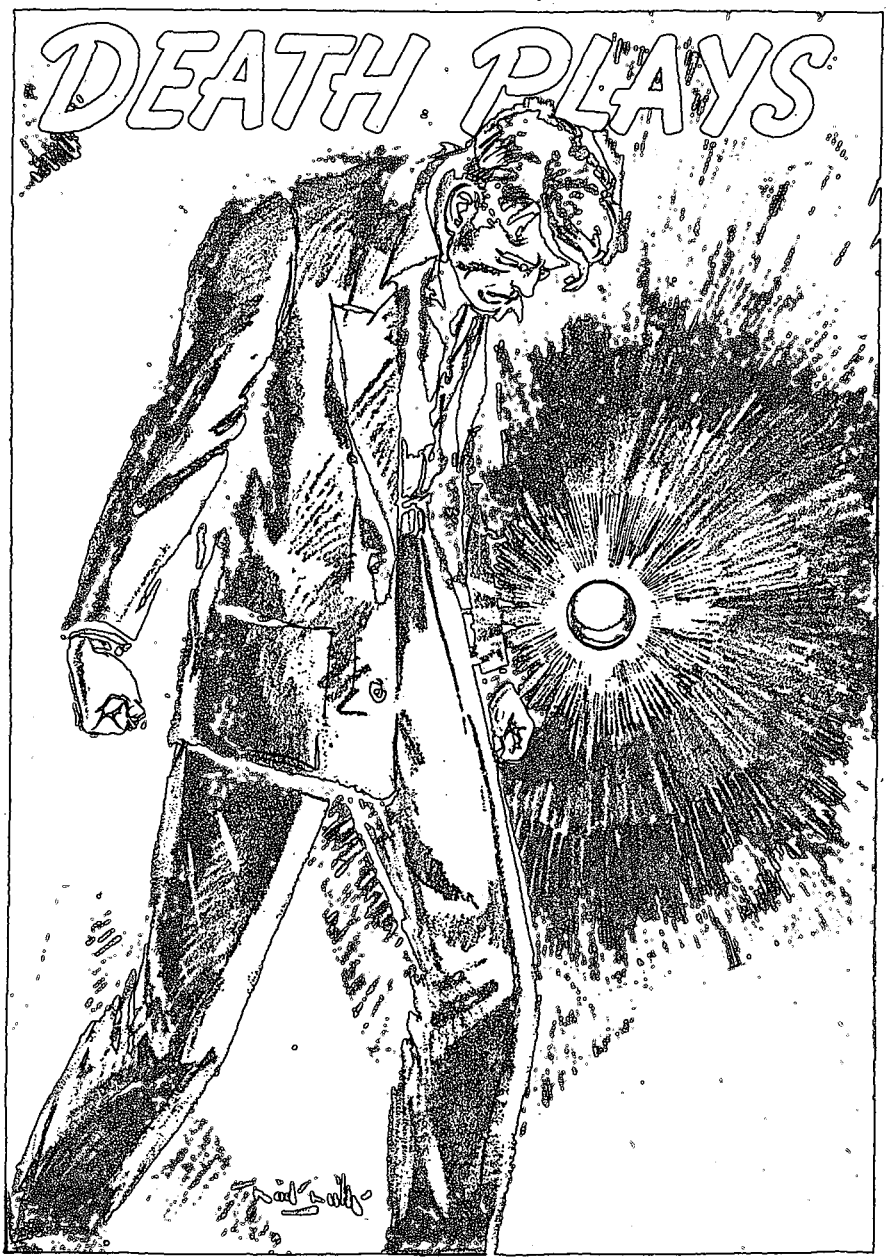

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A GAME

by DAVID V. REED

Gambling ships in space are an evil, but a Lindite game ship is Horror itself! Aboard one you gamble for your life, not for money!

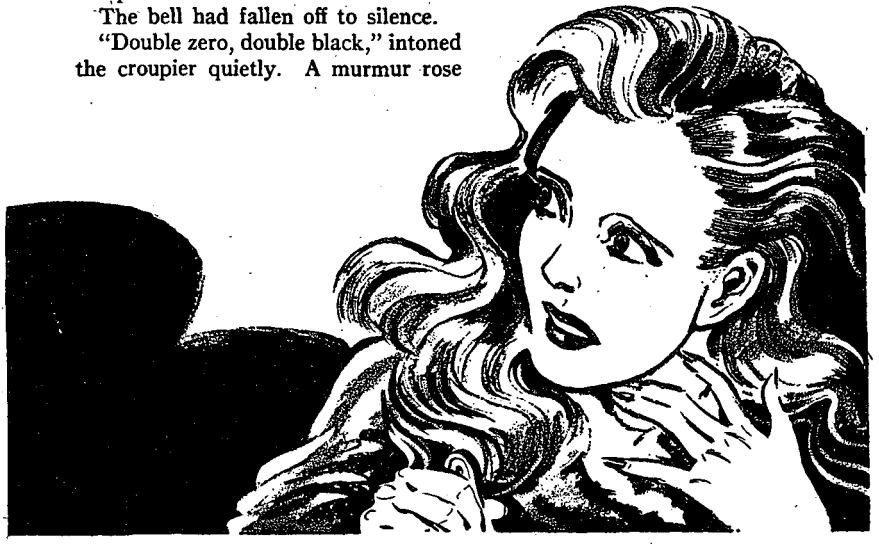
"NO MORE bets, the wheel is spinning," the croupier said monotonously.

The silver bell in the center of the table began to peal as the four concentric wheels slowed in their spinning. Cary Harper casually leaned over the side of the huge oval gambling table and an easy grin of satisfaction crossed his features. When the last wheel stopped, Harper looked up for a moment. He was amazed when his eyes met the unconcealed hostility that lay in the gaze of the shriveled Martian croupier.

The bell had fallen off to silence.

"Double zero, double black," intoned the croupier quietly. A murmur rose from the other players as the croupier swept clear every square except the one before Harper. He matched the stack of chips that lay on Harper's square, blue for white, and pushed the pile toward him.

He had won again, Harper thought, but somehow an uneasiness came over him. The way the croupier had looked at him, as if after these past two weeks he suddenly knew who Harper was. Not that Harper cared either way. But it shouldn't have made any difference to the croupier, and the cold anger in



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the Martian's eyes had definitely expressed that it did make a difference, that Harper wasn't wanted aboard this ship.

It was this realization that unaccountably sent a thrill through the slender, white-clad figure of Cary Harper. He looked again at the Martian, and suddenly he turned around and stopped.

Directly behind him stood a barrel-chested man of medium size, looking directly into Harper's eyes through thick-lensed glasses. There was a faint smile on the man's lips that seemed to distort his face, as if he wasn't used to smiling, and the experiment was painful.

"Hello, Harper," said Maxwell Green. "Here we are again."

Harper's eyes danced, swiftly surveying the large room. There was a man standing at every doorway.

"You can't do a thing legally," Harper said. "We're in the territorial limits of Tyuio."

Maxwell Green pursed his lips and shook his head in mock sadness.

"Not at the moment," he sighed. "The ship has been cruising all afternoon, and a few minutes ago it passed beyond the hundred mile limit. So it is legal, after all."

Harper looked around again. He was completely confused by the sudden appearance of Green. Where had he come from? Quietly he said:

"You don't mind if I cash these?" and he began scooping the stacks of colored chips into a little sack. Hardly any of the numerous people around them were aware of what was happening; they might have been two friends talking.

He turned around again and said, in a whisper:

"Watch yourself, Max," and even as he spoke he swung the heavy bag squarely into Green's face. Green let out a roar of pain as he fell back and Harper vaulted past him. He was running at full speed toward the nearest door. The man who stood there saw him coming and he braced himself, but the speed, as well as the strangeness, of the attack left him uncertain. He had no time to think. When Harper was three feet away, he suddenly lowered his head and charged into the man like a human battering ram.

The two men flew out of the doorway and hit the deck together. Harper rolled over, took an instant to wallop the man as he came up, and plunged swiftly through the double doors to the outer deck. Immediately he knew that Green had been telling the truth. The ship had cruised away from Tyuio, and the air was too thin for prolonged exposure. He climbed a ladder and ran toward the parking hangar.

Alarm signals were being piped to the crew. Somehow everything seemed in readiness for his capture. One of the hangar attendants was listening to the signals. Harper walked up behind him, tapped him on the shoulder, and laid him out with a short punch that came up from the deck. Then he bent over the hangar control board and punched the button for the lock release, jamming the gear with a heavy iron a second later.

Then he was lost in the maze of private fliers that filled the hangar. Most of the ship's clients preferred their own fliers to the ship's launch for the sake of privacy, but these, Harper knew, would all be locked. He saw what he wanted in a corner—a bright yellow taxiflier. He jumped in, revved the motors, and the plane crawled to the exit track and headed for the lock.

Just as he reached it, Green came running in at the far end, followed by a score of men. Harper cut the motors

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long enough to yell:

"Perfectly legal, Max!" Then he was heading for the great green ball that was the planetoid Tyuio, a hundred miles or so off.

CARY HARPER kept the proceedings perfectly legal by coming in with the meter. He paid the steep tariff that had clicked off, got a receipt from the manager of the taxiflier station, and in response to the manager's questions about the whereabouts of the driver, laughed insanely, challenged the manager to a duel and stalked off muttering an obscure Uranian prayer to himself.

A quarter of an hour later he breezed through the gently bustling lobby of the Rhon-Vhedy Plaza Hotel. He smiled at the girl behind the tobacconist's counter, nodded to one of the assistant managers and quietly called his floor number to the elevator operator. Cary Harper seldom spoke to strangers; a professional gambler had to be careful about his identity and the chief clue to recognition—his voice.

He got off at the fortieth floor and entered his suite. Monte was sitting on the terrace, basking in the warm brilliance of a gold and emerald sun. He squinted up at Harper and drawled:

"I thought you forgot where you lived."

"I almost moved," Harper grinned, sinking into a soft chair and reaching for Monte's drink. "Got some news for you, Monte. Maxwell Green is here in Vhedy."

"So you found out?" Monte said. He was a small, thinnish man with delicate hands and clever, restless eyes, and he fixed his eyes on Harper and scowled. "How did it go?"

"You mean you knew?"

"About a minute too late," Monte nodded. "Just as you left the lobby this morning, I caught sight of Max getting out of a chair and taking off after you. You got into a cab and he took one right behind you. I figured a procession of three cabs might be a little conspicuous, so I laid off." His scowl deepened as he added, "And the way you been acting these last days, I thought maybe you wouldn't want me to find out where you were going. You got secrets all of a sudden."

"It's no secret," Harper shrugged. "Between us?" He hesitated. "Well, maybe one secret . . . for a few more days." Slowly sipping the drink he recounted what had happened aboard the *Venus Sapphire*.

Monte was silent for a while after he had finished. Then he said:

"I don't get it. What's a specialist like you doing on a sucker ship, playing big stakes on the four-wheel? You ain't after the money . . . you got a trade for that, a fat trade."

"Sure," said Harper, grinning again. "Only the money I make that way is ours, and the money I make elsewhere is mine. And because I know you wouldn't approve, I wanted to hold out on you until I was ready."

"I'll take a chance on that," said Monte, his face momentarily relaxing into a smile. "But Max is serious business."

"Possibly. What do you think he's up to?"

"Think? I don't have to think. He's out to get you."

"And how did he know we were here?"

"He tailed us from Church's planet."

"Indeed? A remarkable feat, if true." Harper thoughtfully toyed with the empty glass. "But even so, a prize Colonial I.P. sleuth doesn't come to Tyuio on a manhunt. You're forgetting that this wanderer's paradise provides immunity from the I.P. or any-

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body else. The Tyuionians extradite no one and get no one in return. It's a cinch he can't do anything here."

"You got a bet," said Monte. "A guy with a one-cylinder brain like his is always up to the obvious. He hates you."

"He hates half the world. No, Monte, even a rat like Max wouldn't let his disposition interfere with business."

"Cary Harper is his business."

"Not when there's something bigger around . . . something that even Tyuio outlaws."

"Like what?"

HARPER hesitated before he answered. "Like a Lindite ship. And a hundred thousand bucks as a reward for turning it in."*

*Lindar, one of the Sander's group of planets, at the outermost reaches of known interstellar space, is the only one of its group to retain any life. Its decades of marauding are directly attributable to the fact that it is dying, and with it, the almost fabled race of Lindites. From this stems the most vicious form of piracy the System has ever known.

Locked by nature to a planet on which scarcely any other life can long survive, the Lindites, of whom less than a thousand are believed to be still alive, found that even their life had become impossible for their small number. They did not have enough people to work their mines, the famed energy mines from which Lindar drew light and heat. There were not enough of them to run their ships, manage their industries, or perform the countless daily tasks necessary to the functioning of a complex civilization. Faced with death, they realized that only the bringing in of fresh blood and stock, new races that would remain subservient to them, could they continue to fight for survival.

The physical nature of Lindar, alas, defeated this end. The terrible atmospheric pressure, the presence of poisonous gases, and the existence of a strange element in its atmosphere, could not be overcome even by the great science of the Lindites. Life for an alien race on Lindar was possible at the most for ten years, hard, miserable years, and then a death so horrible that System Councils early forbade the sentencing of any criminals for any reason to Lindar. Of all System races, only the Jovians and humans were able to exist at all in the delicate, perilously balanced world of Lindar. The small numbers of the Jovians, as well as their predominantly feeble intelligence, precluded them. There remained only the human race, far-flung and numerous throughout the System, as the hope of the Lindites.

Two other factors complicated the task of the Lindites. One was the presence of the strange element in its atmosphere. After even short intervals of residency on Lindar, humans found they could no longer return to the outer world; the strange element had become vital for life. They were forced to remain on Lindar, where they died. The other factor was inherent in the harsh world that Lindar, itself a delicate force, presented to aliens. Strangely enough, as the experiments of the famed Dr. A. A. Kingsley proved, unless humans were thoroughly reconciled to life on Lindar, they could not live at all! So long as they retained the will to leave this strange world of Lindar, or any will at all, they were useless to the Lindites.

The Lindites had early experimented with would-be suicides, for whose families they provided enormous sums of money on the condition that the Lindites would then own the would-be suicides. The experiment brought few humans, and failed too often: frequently the slaves killed themselves as soon as they arrived on Lindar.

Lindar became a pariah, shunned and feared by the world. Only its far distance from the rest of the System proved a consolation. But it was then that the Lindites sent forth their piratical ships, ships that brought back voluntary slaves to work in their dying world. With great cunning, the Lindites played upon one of the most evident weaknesses of humans to gain their ends—gambling!

They sent out a small fleet of ships that outwardly resembled the hosts of gambling and pleasure craft that plied the trade routes of the System. They were gambling ships in every detail . . . but they added the one detail that distinguished Lindite ships from all the rest: they played for money and ended by playing for human lives. This final detail was accomplished by a series of skillful moves which led victims on, ending in the offer of the white globe and the Drink of Honor.

It was then, these last elements, that gave the Lindites the power to bring voluntary slaves to Lindar. The I.P. proved unable to stop the practice completely. Attacks on Lindar were impossible because of their distance and strange armaments, and because their cities were, for the most part, far underground.

In desperation, the I.P. established huge patrols which were fairly successful. In addition, they posted a standing reward of one hundred thousand dollars in interplanetary currency for aid in the apprehension of Lindite ships. They were but infrequently claimed, and . . .—(Condensed from Prof. Karl Worth's: *"A History of the Outer World and Lindar,"* pp. 604-655.—Ed.

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"Are you kidding?" said Monte. "There hasn't been a report of a Lindite ship in two years."

"That doesn't mean there haven't been any operating for two years, does it?" Harper said. "They're only reported by accident, you know." He smiled at Monte's elaborate gesture of boredom. "Okay," he agreed, "it sounds screwy. But remember that time we were working that Jovian moon settlement? Remember how things kept falling off, and then they discovered a Lindite ship had been in the vicinity?"

"So?"

"These last two weeks have been lousy," said Harper. "And I mean progressively lousy. It's as if we had terrific competition."

"Listen," said Monte, soberly. "We've been together eight years, and the closest we ever got to a Lindite ship was *hearing* about it once. What the hell is getting into you?"

"I got a feeling," Harper shrugged. "Something funny about that *Venus Sapphire* boat. It adds up, too. First, the look that Martian croupier gave me. Ever hear of a gentleman from the profession who was unwelcome on a gambling ship? Yep! Only on Lindite ships."

"Go ahead," Monte sneered. "Get the I.P. to raid the ship because someone gave you a look. And what would Maxwell Green, an I.P. man, be doing there? From the way you put it, the ship was co-operating with him."

"Why not? They'd have to." Harper got up and began pacing. "If you'll only listen a minute . . . Here's the way I see it. Max came here on a tip from the I.P. that a Lindite ship was around somewhere. He comes to Tyuio and by coincidence he spots us at the hotel. Maybe for a minute, his yen to lock me up gets the better of him and he follows me, just for auld lang syne. I happen to lead him to one of six or seven gambling ships that are hanging around Tyuio.

"Okay so far? Thanks. Once we're on the ship, Max suddenly realizes he has a chance to nab me, so he asks the captain of the *Venus Sapphire* to sail out of bounds. Certainly the captain recognized Max; every gambling ship in the System knows Max, so the captain is only too glad to agree to anything Max wants. Max tries and misses. Not only does he miss me, but he misses the fact that he is on *the* ship of the six or seven that he wants."

"But how do you know that Max is after a Lindite ship?" said Monte, perplexed. "What the hell kind of a deduction is that?"

"Because he certainly couldn't be after us or anyone else on Tyuio. It wouldn't do him any good, you agree. But that alone might still be a doubtful assumption, unless we could find a better reason for Max's being here than the fact that we're here. Now, *if there really was* a Lindite ship around, that would certainly be a better reason—right? You would agree that he was probably sooner after that ship than us?"

"Right."

"So—suppose I tell you that I *know* there's a Lindite ship in the vicinity—suppose I can prove it—would you be convinced that the story hangs together?"

"Uh-huh. Where's your proof?"

Cary Harper grinned and sat down again.

"Ain't got no proof," he said, cheerfully. "All I got is a feeling. I didn't like the look that Martian gave me."

"Please, why don't you stop wasting my time?" Monte pleaded. "I came out here for a sun tan, not an earache."

"Just the same," said Harper, "if I'm

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right, I have Max where I want him. And where do I want him? Where he may have to kick in with half of a hundred thousand bucks reward to a guy he hates. And why? Because I already know which one is the Lindite ship and he's just beginning a guessing campaign. And since time is going to be important, because they know that Max is around, I'm going to hunt up Max and have a talk with him."

"If you're through talking to yourself," said Monte in disgust, "I'd like to mention that things wouldn't be getting so progressively lousy if you showed up now and then and played a little, instead of disappearing every afternoon to the *Venus Sapphire* and every evening to I don't know where. Are you going to play tonight?"

Harper nodded distantly.

"Well, that's something. As for your hunting up Max, *I* got a feeling that Max is still going to do the hunting."

MAXWELL GREEN leaned back in his chair and finished his speech.

"It's a damned clever game he's been working, Mr. Van Horn," he said. "You can see he didn't overlook anything." He waited until James Van Horn turned away from the crystal window where he had been standing motionless for long minutes. His face was etched with lines of anger.

"I'm grateful to you, Mr. Green," he said. "I can scarcely . . ." He left the sentence unfinished, lost in thought.

Presently Green spoke.

"Thank you," he said, "but this isn't a question of gratitude. I'm here on a job—a job I've come a long, long way to see through. It may be possible for you to help me." He rubbed the purple welt that lay under his eye and added, "I can nail Cary Harper the minute he's deported from Tyuio."

"I don't understand," said Van Horn, quietly.

Green stood up and walked to the desk, facing the older man.

"I won't mince words, Mr. Van Horn," he said. "You're one of the most powerful men in this part of the System. You own half of Tyuio. A suggestion from you to the proper Tyuionian authorities that Harper be deported could hardly be neglected."

"I see. May I ask, Mr. Green, on what specific charges the Colonial Police want this man Harper?"

Green hesitated for a moment before he answered.

"Assault," he said, his heavy face reddening until the dark welt seemed to grow even darker. "Assault while resisting arrest. He was wanted on ten separate conspiracy charges."

"And being wanted for conspiracy, you mention assault first?"

"Yes. Assault against the Colonial Police during a space flight is worth ten years imprisonment."

"May I ask whether you were the man he assaulted?"

"I don't see what difference it makes," said Green, quietly.

"None," said Van Horn, "except that I should dislike using what influence I may have to settle a private affair. Because here on Tyuio, you see, it is a private affair."

"Then would you say," said Green, evenly, "that Harper's use of your family is also a private affair?"

"Frankly, Mr. Green, I would have preferred it so."

Van Horn threw in the audiovisor switch and pressed down one of a row of lettered buttons. In a moment, on a large screen that was imbedded in the wall behind him, a girl's face appeared. Rather, the suggestion of a face appeared, for the girl was combing her hair and her long, blonde tresses hung down over her face. She moved away a

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mass of golden hair until a mischievous blue eye twinkled through, and she said:

"Yes, father?"

"Please come to my study, Lois," said Van Horn. He threw the switch back and faced Green. "Unfortunately," he said, taking up the conversation again, "the life of a junior bank clerk, no matter how wealthy or influential his father is, cannot remain a private affair. If what you say is true, Mr. Green, Harper will be deported."

THE two men waited in silence until Lois Van Horn entered the study. She came in on tip-toe, her lovely face silently questioning her father with a curious smile, as if she were unused to coming to his study, as if it were an intrusion. When her father introduced her to Green, mentioning his official capacity, she raised an eyebrow pertly.

"Lois," said Van Horn, "do you know a man named Cary Harper?"

Suddenly the girl's expression changed. The smile faded as she said:

"I know a man named Cary. I—I didn't know his other name." She looked sharply at Green. "Why do you ask, father?"

"How did you meet him?"

"It was at a restaurant, two weeks ago. He fell against my table, the coffee spilled all over him. Then . . . we just met," she finished, looking from one man to the other. Her smile flashed into being again with startling brilliance. "How silly of you, darling," she laughed. "You didn't have to hire detectives. I was going to tell you all about him. He's just the kind of a man you—"

"What do you know about him, Lois?"

"Well, I must say you're being very solemn about it," said the girl, sitting down on the desk. "What do I know about him? Let's see. He's taller than brother by so much." She held thumb and forefinger apart to indicate two inches. "And he has dark hair and dark eyes, and he likes to go rowing in the park. And he dances magnificently. We've gone dancing almost every night. Aside from that, I don't know what to tell you except that I asked him to marry me yesterday and he said yes."

Van Horn recoiled.

"What did you say?" he snapped.

"What's the matter, Dad? I didn't really mean it that way. I only meant that he thinks he did the proposing. . ." Her voice died away. There was no mistaking the expression on her father's face now.

"Lois," said Van Horn, "earlier this afternoon I discovered that your brother Richard has been stealing from the bank that employs him. He's stolen almost forty thousand dollars to satisfy gambling debts, debts that he owed to the man you've been seeing these two weeks!"

Lois Van Horn looked at her father as if she hadn't understood him.

"No," she said slowly. "I don't see what you're trying. . . I love him, Dad. You can't separate us. You don't—"

"Listen to me, Lois," Van Horn interrupted, taking her hand. "I'm not trying to do anything. You know I wouldn't interfere with your life. But this man Harper has been seeing you just to find out things about your brother Richard. He's driven him to theft. All you mean to him is a further chance to meet prospects whom he can rob."

The girl was still shaking her head, unable to speak, when Green handed her a small, folded paper. She took it with trembling hands and opened it. At the top was a small picture of Cary Harper, and under it were several

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lines of print:

WANTED BY THE COLONIAL INTERPLANETARY POLICE
CARY HARPER

Particulars: Cary Harper is six feet, one inch in height; weight, 170; dark hair, dark eyes. Dresses excellently, speaks several languages, drinks in moderation and smokes Virginia (Earth) cigarettes. He is invariably accompanied by a confederate known as Three-Card Monte. Harper has no prison record, but police are warned that he is clever and dangerous. He is a professional gambler and is usually found on cruise vessels or in first class hotels in large cities.

He is wanted by the C.I.P. for first degree assault and by the Royal Uranian Government on ten counts of conspiracy. Address all inquiries: CH-9055.

Lois Van Horn put down the paper and looked dully at her father.

"Yes," she said, chokingly, "this is the man. But I can't believe. . . I can't believe that he. . . did what you say."

"Of course," said Green, in a subdued voice, "I understand how you must feel about this, Miss Van Horn. Harper is one of the slickest articles still in circulation. And if there are any doubts in your mind about what I've told your father, I am prepared to prove the case against this man." He paused and looked at Van Horn. "As it happens, Mr. Van Horn, I have had word that your son Richard will be present at a gambling group tonight, playing opposite Harper again."

Van Horn put his arm around his daugher and said,

"Can you arrange for us to be there?"

Green nodded silently.

"I DON'T get it," said Monte, gloomily. "It's just like I told you—Green's doing the hunting instead of you." The sound of his footsteps echoed against the walls of the old houses that lined the street. Cary Harper walked beside him, humming a tune. "What's the idea of Max calling you up at the hotel and wanting to know where he could meet you?"

"Maybe," Harper grinned, "he wanted to meet me, huh?"

"Sure. An I.P. man agrees to meet you at a session?"

"Why not? Gambling's legal in Tyuio, and that's where I said I would be."

"The whole thing stinks!" said Monte, emphatically. "An hour after you take a sock at him he calls you up for an appointment. Don't tell me he decided to kiss and make up. What's cooking?"

"My theory, Monte, and this fits perfectly. I told you Max wouldn't let anything interfere with business. Maybe it occurred to him that I might know something he would like to know."

Monte snorted.

"That Lindite ship junk again?"

"Fifty even money he proposes a deal before I do?"

"You got a bet."

They were close to the outskirts of the city now. Behind them the lights of Vhedy filled the night with the soft glow of myriad colors, but here the only illumination came from the sparkling light of nearby moons, and after awhile, from the country lamps of a large house that stood back from the road, shaded by gigantic Venusian swamp trees.

Just before they reached the high gate that surrounded the house, both men drew on black masks that completely covered their faces. At the gatehouse, Harper held a small white

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card up to the guard's torch for inspection. A winding path led them to the house.

Inside, a servant took their coats and ushered them up a flight of stairs which gave into a huge, luxurious room that was filled with laughter and gaiety. Men and women were everywhere, at the bar, at a large Martian piano that needed three men to make it produce a sound, sitting about and talking casually of all sorts of things. It might have been a party at a country estate but for one minor detail—everyone in the room was masked with identical, black silken masks that allowed only their eyes to be seen.

Cary Harper and Monte entered and sat down quietly in a corner. For many of the people in the room, the masks were a dramatic frill, an added filip to thrill hunters. But there were those present, undoubtedly, who would not have come if masking had not been compulsory, men and women who for some private reason needed money desperately, who were prepared to play for stakes that might have attracted too much attention aboard a gambling ship. There were always such people . . . it was for them that Lindite ships existed . . .

SO CARY HARPER thought as he sat, thumbing idly through a book, trying to remember which of the voices around him he had heard before. There were hardly any. In his first week in this house, number forty-four Feyda Lane, there had been the same voices night after night, voices that spoke infrequently because they had come too often. Now those voices were missing. They had disappeared one after another in the ensuing days, and with their disappearance, the nightly stakes at number forty-four Feyda Lane had dwindled.

It was indeed as Harper had told Monte—as if they were running against terrific competition, against a house that offered better odds. And there could be only one answer to that, for only one kind of house could afford to play for better odds . . . a house that counted its winnings in some other medium than money.

Harper listened to the bubbling conversation and knew from their carelessness that they didn't give a damn if they were recognized. He almost regretted that he had come; such people wouldn't play for the stakes that interested Harper.

Still, when the cashier came to him, he bought a sizable stack of chips. Monte had sauntered away, unwilling to allow anyone to associate him with Harper, as they might have done were a short man always to be seen with a tall one. It was one of the innumerable little precautions of the profession. There was always the possibility that someday they would run across someone in this room, on a cruise, say, where knowledge of their identity might prove embarrassing.

Servants opened the door to an adjoining room, and as Harper entered, he was given a pair of black gloves which he put on. The room contained half a dozen low tables surrounded by chairs, every bit of the furniture a dull ebony. Harper went to the largest table and sat down. Of the others near him, he thought he recognized two men. In a moment, the house representative inquired for their game.

"Anacrat," said a man.

Only two men beside Harper voted for it, and the choice went to the mild Mercurian game of Senna. The house representative broke open a sealed carton of Senna cards and laid them on the table. The cards had snow white backs, and against the black of the

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table and the gloved hands they stood out with sharp clarity.

Several rounds of play went by during which Harper tried the bank, won it once and lost it promptly. He had no interest in the proceedings until a well-dressed young man opposite him won the bank, after several rather daring plays.

Immediately the bank called for double stakes. Three players signaled drop-out and Harper took up one of the vacancies. He lost, and promptly took up another vacancy, playing three hands against the bank. He lost again, and when two others dropped, Harper took every vacancy and called for six hands.

A murmur swept the room. The masked figure opposite Harper nodded agreement.

"Double stakes again?" he asked. Harper put up the stakes and settled back. He had changed in the past few minutes. If his mask had been off, those around him at the table would have seen his eyes were cool and clear, and a faint smile playing about his lips. He played with a detached manner, a carelessness almost.

THE white cards fell noiselessly. After the first round the murmuring had grown stronger. Players who had dropped from other tables came to stand near this table, watching the hands. In the first round four of Harper's six hands had won.

The dealer paused. His eyes swept the table and his hands seemed to tremble the least bit. Cary Harper made no move to draw in his chips, and the dealer said quietly,

"Odds on?"

Harper nodded and put up more chips. The bank had offered two to one against him. The evening was developing into something quite different from what he had expected.

The second round fell, and talking stopped. Five of Harper's six hands had come through.

The dealer looked across the table and his grey eyes met Cary Harper's. For an instant Harper felt that he wasn't looking into the man's eyes, that his gaze had fallen against something hard and impenetrable. The grey eyes were misty, clouded. The man raised a hand to his forehead, absently, and felt the mask. Under that mask he must have been perspiring, but he was unable to do anything about it. It was the unconscious gesture of a man unused to masked playing, a novice at the game, and yet his stakes were—

"Odds again?"

There was a harsh intake of breath from the swelled ranks of the spectators, but it came from Harper's unhesitating agreement rather than the offer. The bank was now offering five to one on the third round, a tremendous figure. But the mathematical odds were at least fifty to one. Unless Harper came up with at least three winners, out of a possible total six winners left in the deck, he would be wiped out.

He had agreed with instinctive swiftness. Long moments before he had decided his course if the offer came. His eyes had silently lifted across the room to where Monte was playing stolidly, and Monte had turned to him for an instant; he could almost see Monte's smile, the same smile that lay coldly on Harper. He was like ice now. . . .

One by one the cards had noiselessly slid to the table, and they showed five winners!

Harper stared through his mask at the man across the table. In three quick rounds he had lost the bank and close to four thousand dollars. What was going on in his mind? He played with sudden fits and starts, as if each card

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that he dealt was a struggle.

"What stakes does the bank play?" said the man.

Harper waved a hand, avoiding talking, signifying that the bank was open. The man called the cashier, bought an additional five thousand dollars with crisp bills and asked for a count of available hands.

Harper glanced around the table. No one else was playing. It had developed into a duel.

"Ten hands," said Harper.

"I'll play them all."

EXPERTLY, deftly, Harper dealt the white cards. He had declared the bank open and he met every proposed increase. His interest was now in the man, rather than in the money. Harper had played larger stakes, but his opponent was something new. He plunged at the slightest chance, doubled every high card. When he won he looked at the chips for long moments, as if he was counting them. When he held the bank, which changed hands again and again, he played stupidly.

Once during the hour that the duel lasted Harper felt a pang of regret. That was when the man bought another ten thousand dollars worth of chips. It wasn't that the man's luck was against him—the fact was that he never gave luck a chance, that he played insanely, blindly, pressing, squeezing, forcing himself against a wall. Harper didn't like it. He didn't enjoy sitting behind the law of averages. It took the drama out of the game. It made Harper a banker even when the other man held the bank.

When it was over, the man sat quietly, his glazed eyes fixed on the chips as if he didn't understand what had happened. He got up finally and slowly left the room. After that, Harper waited only until he had lost the bank to the returning players, then he too stopped.

As he walked out of the room, a man fell into step beside him. Even through the man's mask there was no mistaking his short, barrel-chested figure. It was Maxwell Green. Two paces behind, also heading for the stairs, were a man and a woman.

"Nice killing you made tonight, Harper," Green said.

Harper turned in a swift gesture of annoyance.

"Don't bother using names," he said. "What's on your mind?"

Green motioned to one of the side doors.

"Let's step in here. It's all right. I've arranged it." He opened the door and went in behind Harper. The man and the woman came up quickly and followed the two men in. Before Harper could say anything, Green said, "They're in on this—friends of mine."

"In on what?"

"On your little game," said Green. With a sudden thrust he came forward and tore the mask from Harper's face. Then he turned to the man and woman and said, "This should remove the last doubt."

The woman turned quickly and started for the door, but with a leap, Harper was there before her. He closed the door again, and standing with his back against it, said,

"I don't understand what you're up to, Green, but I think this calls for a general unmasking." His face was cold and hard as he surveyed the three masked figures.

"I think not," said Green. He held his right hand up. There was a heavy service heat pistol in his hand. "Get away from that door," he said, coming forward.

Harper slowly shook his head.

"Remember," he said, "this isn't legal." In complete disregard of Green,

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he advanced to the man who stood beside Green and ripped off the mask, staring at the revealed face. After a momentary silence, he said, "But I don't know you. . . ."

Green said,

"This is the father of the boy you fleeced tonight, the boy you've driven to debt and stealing."

A baffled expression came over Cary Harper.

"What are you talking about?"

"Perhaps you know me better than my father." As she spoke, the girl took off her mask.

HARPER stood there stunned. He tried to speak but no sound came from his bloodless lips.

"There's no use pretending, Cary," said the girl, her voice subdued and controlled. "You only met me because it was convenient for your business activities. You drew me out about my brother and my friends like a salesman with a prospective list of clients. You've bled my brother white, until he turned thief, and even that wasn't enough for you. Tonight you fleeced him from the—" In spite of herself, tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Lois," said Harper, drawing a hand across his face. "I swear to you that I didn't know that boy was your brother. I've never played against him before. I've never even spoken to him. All these things you're saying don't mean anything . . . they can't mean anything. It's true that I'm a gambler. I didn't tell you, I couldn't. I was going to quit and tell you afterward. But these other things—Lois, you can't go!"

She had started for the door again. Her father, his face the picture of frozen anger, came between her and Harper as Harper tried to stop her. From behind Green stuck the gun into Harper's back and said,

"Get out of the way, Harper. This time I mean it."

The door opened and a voice said,

"Put away that gun, Max. You're a big boy now."

Monte closed the door behind him and faced Green, holding a deadly Martian dart gun in his hand.

"There's only one dart in this," he said solemnly, "but you can have it. I ain't selfish."

Green regarded Monte, then, pursing his lips, he lowered his pistol and returned it to its holster. Harper stood there, still bewildered trying to think. Thoughts were racing about crazily in his mind, eluding him just when they seemed to make sense. If only —

"Nothing you can say will alter matters," said Van Horn, grimly. "I give you my word you will both be deported within twenty-four hours."

Deported! Then that was the answer! Somehow, Green had worked out a plan that would bring Monte and him within Green's grasp. Somehow he had learned of his meetings with Lois, then convinced her and Van Horn . . . but there it left a muddy trail . . .

"Monte," said Harper, "you've been here every night. Did you ever see that man I played against? Has he been here before?"

"Maybe once, but I doubt it."

Then young Van Horn had gambled elsewhere. And if he had gambled for the kind of money he had put forward tonight, then it—it fitted perfectly again! It began to make sense again!

"Listen, Max," said Harper, quickly. "I know why you're here on Tyuio. I don't care what you think about this case. Maybe you're out to get me, but you're missing the big thing this is pointing to. That boy hasn't been playing here and there isn't a place he could lose such money except one—a Lindite ship!"

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GREEN'S eyes narrowed incredulously, then he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"You're slipping, Harper!" he said, happily. "You're really digging them up now!"

"Don't you see?" cried Harper. "He's too well known to have lost a lot of money publicly on an ordinary gambling boat. And this is the only big gambling house in Vhedy and I know he hasn't played here."

Green stopped laughing suddenly, then he said,

"Really? Then why should he have been here tonight at all? Did those convenient Lindites of yours decide that his money wasn't good anymore? Or that he wouldn't be happy in Lindar?"

Harper was unable to answer. There was no answer, unless Monte was wrong, or they were all wrong. Where was his wild theory of a Lindite ship now? Green had laughed at him instead of making proposals. Green had come to Tyuio determined to bring Cary Harper back with him. That alone was his reason for being there, and that was the business he had undertaken to finish. Deported—that was the answer to it all.

"Lois," said Harper, desperately, "I can't explain, but there must be some explanation. If you spoke to your brother—"

He knew it was useless to speak. This time when she went to the door he made no effort to stop her. Something had gone dead in her, so completely dead that it seemed strange to think it had ever been alive. Her eyes looked past him, cold, filled with scorn and contempt.

"Lois," Harper cried, "you must trust me!"

"I'd sooner trust a snake."

Moments later, when they had gone, Monte stood beside Harper in the room, waiting for him to speak.

"We were in love, Monte," Harper said. He seemed to be in a daze. "We were going to be married . . ."

"I know. I listened at the door. That's why you didn't tell me about going to the ship. You knew I'd be against your seeing that girl, or any girl, seriously." Monte nodded his head in sympathy as he went on quietly. "It's like I always said, Cary. The way we live, guys like us can't get tangled up. Our motto has to be 'Makes No Difference.' We're the original what-the-hell boys. No strings, no attachments, nothing to lose. Guys like us got to stay cold inside."

"I was going to tell her, Monte. I was hiding money from you, money I'd won on that ship, so that we could start new. I was going to get out of the game for good."

"You're wrong, Cary," said Monte, softly. He took Harper's arm as they started out. "You couldn't have gotten out. But if you really wanted to try, I'd have been rooting for you all the way. . . ."

IT was some three hours later, halfway through the long night of Tyuio, that the audivisor in Cary Harper's room buzzed stridently. Harper came in from the terrace where he had been sitting with Monte, unable to sleep, and detached the buzzer. The noise stopped, but a few moments later, the hotel phone jangled and Monte answered. Monte came out to the terrace and sank into his chair.

"That was her on the AV," he said. "After you cut the connection she called the hotel. Asked them to put you on. Important."

"What'd you say?"

"Do not disturb."

Harper nodded his head. It was quiet there on the terrace. The stars of

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the ever unfamiliar constellations shone brightly, scarcely twinkling in the clear, thin atmosphere of Tyuio. Far, far off, a mere dot in the void at that great distance, was the Ghort constellation. A hundred odd planetoids made up that group, among them Forelle, the water-station of the Jupiter-Tyuio voyage. How far was Jupiter from here? Months, perhaps, by slow, rusty freighters. Far enough away to help a man forget, if one could choose one's destination. . . .

"What do you suppose she wanted?" Monte shrugged.

"What's the difference?" he said. "You know where you stand with her, and now she knows where she stands with you."

The audivisor began to buzz again.

"Maybe I shouldn't have put the switch back on," said Monte. "That must be her again. I'll take—"

"Never mind." Harper got up and went back to the sitting room. He flipped open the switch. The pale amber screen flickered into life, and there was Lois Van Horn.

"Cary!" she cried. Her eyes that had been so cold were wide with fear now. Her golden hair was disheveled. She stood before her transmitter, seemingly oblivious of the fact that she wore only a filmy negligee. "Cary!" she breathed. "Something has happened to my brother. You must listen to me!"

She said that because she could see that Harper was about to destroy the connection. For a split instant, Harper hesitated. A few hours before he had asked her almost the same thing and she . . .

In that moment of indecision the girl acted. She brought her own transmitter into line with the screen of what apparrently was the audivisor system of her home. The screen was lit, showing the interior of a room. The room appeared empty.

"It's my brother's room, Cary," came the girl's choked voice. "He doesn't know his transmitter is on. He's doing—"

Harper saw what Ralph Van Horn was doing then. The boy had come within view of the screen, and Harper watched the scene with paralyzed fascination. Ralph Van Horn looked strikingly like his sister. He had the same blue eyes, his hair was closely cropped and the color of wet sand. His high forehead was covered with sweat, and a large blue vein stood out prominently on his temple.

The boy stood in the middle of the floor. At his feet lay a globe, glistening white and small enough to be held in one hand. Young Van Horn was staring at the globe with a terrifying, intense concentration. Every fibre of his being seemed to focus on the globe.

Then a strange thing happened. Slowly, as the boy stared at the globe, it began to rise from the floor! He was three feet away from it and it kept rising, seemingly of its own volition, until it was a foot off the floor. It hung there in mid-air for a moment, its polished surface revolving the least bit, then it began to drop. It went halfway to the floor and suddenly bobbed up again, higher than it had been, and all at once it hit the floor and rested there without moving.

RALPH VAN HORN sank to the floor beside it, his face working, tears streaming down his cheeks silently, the picture of utter exhaustion. After awhile he got up, waited until his breathing had become normal again, took up the ball in his hands and disappeared from the screen.

"It's the Lindites!" Harper snapped, releasing himself from the spell that had come over him. "Listen to me—you've

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got to get the police—no, that's no good. It's Green we need now! Tell your father to get Green immediately!"

"It's no use," the girl sobbed. "I've tried to get him for the past half-hour. He went away with father and I came home alone. I can't find either of them. You must help me, Cary, you must!"

'Where is Green staying?"

"At Interplanetary House."

"I'll get him. You stay there and don't let your brother out of your sight. If he tries to leave, stop him—no matter how!"

Harper switched off and turned quickly to Monte, who stood beside him. He had come in from the terrace long moments before, he had seen enough to understand.

"Monte, we've got to find Max Green!"

"What's wrong with the Tyuio police?"

"The scandal—it's bound to get out!"

"What's that to you?"

Harper turned back to the audivisor.

"Get me Interplanetary House, fast!" The screen blanked, then went on again. "Mr. Maxwell Green, please."

The girl operator smiled.

"He just came in. One moment, please."

"Luck!" said Harper, fiercely, and the screen lit up again.

"Hello, Harper," said Green, mildly surprised. "What's this?"

"Max, I just got a call from Lois Van Horn! You can call her if you don't believe me. She's seen her brother with one of those white Lindite globes!"

"You're crazy!"

"I'm not crazy! Don't stand there gaping! Call her and then rush over there. I'm going now!"

A QUARTER of an hour later, two surface cabs almost collided as they swung to a halt before the dark entrance of the Van Horn mansion. Harper and Monte leaped out of one cab and Maxwell Green from the other. Swiftly, the trio ran up the tiled stairs and rang at the door. Green was breathless.

"I saw the whole thing," he said grimly. "The girl lined up two AV systems. You were right, Harper, but thank God it's not too late yet."

Lois Van Horn herself swung open the door. Her brother was still in his room. He was still doing the same thing.

"Where's your father?" said Green tersely.

"I thought he was with you."

Green's eyes were darting about through the thick-lensed glasses he wore. He started for the interior stairs.

"Show us upstairs," he said. "Your father's on his way here. He went to the bank with the manager, but he was gone when I called."

The girl led them up a flight of stairs and stopped before a door that gave off from the landing. Without waiting for her to knock, Green swung the door open and strode in.

Ralph Van Horn was lying stretched out on a chair. The white globe lay in the middle of the floor, reflecting the light. The instant Green walked in, young Van Horn jumped from the chair and tried to seize the globe. Halfway in mid-air, Green's barrel-chested, heavy body cut him off with a block. Green got up, took the globe and held it out to the terror-stricken boy.

"We'll make it short and sweet, Mr. Van Horn," he said, quietly. "You're in the hands of Lindites. If you ever want to get out, tell us where you got this Lindite sphere."

A spasm shook the boy's body. He backed away, shaking his head.

"No!" he cried. "I don't know where I got it. I found it! That's it,

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I found it!"

Green grunted and threw the ball to a couch. He advanced to the boy holding his hands away from his sides.

"You can tell me," he said, his voice hardly audible. "I'm the law, you know, and you've got to tell me whether you want to or not . . ." There was a hypnotic quality in Green's manner as he spoke to the boy. "I'm going to find out," he said, softly. "You know that, don't you?"

Young Van Horn edged behind a chair, still retreating from Green, still shaking his head.

"Leave me alone," he whimpered. "Go away!"

Suddenly Green swung around the chair and grabbed the boy. He took both Van Horn's hands into his own, and with his free hand he smashed the boy across his face with an open palm.

"Tell me!" Green demanded furiously, hitting him again and again.

"I found it!" the boy screamed. "Can't you understand? *I found it!*" Helplessly he struggled against Green's bull strength, unable to free himself. *"Lois! Help me!"*

With one accord, Harper and the girl started for Green, but Green had already released the boy. His face was clouded and pre-occupied as he faced them.

"Don't teach me my business, Harper. Stay out of this," Green sighed. "I'm sorry, Miss Van Horn. I'm not enjoying this, believe me." He watched the boy sink into a chair. Young Van Horn couldn't take his eyes off the white globe. Gloomily, Green took the globe from the couch and held it in his hands.

"It's the same old story," he said in a voice that betrayed his anger. "He won't talk—because he can't talk. They've given him what they call their Drink of Honor."

"Max, I know where that globe came from!"

'What?"

"I tell you I do! It's that ship I was on today—the *Venus Sapphire!"*

"How do you know?" Green demanded.

"I—I just know. Call it a hunch, call it anything. Didn't I know there was a Lindite ship around? You've got to take the—"

BUT Green was shaking his head. "You're wrong, Harper. The *Venus Sapphire* pulled out an hour ago. And no Lindite ship would go leaving one of these globes behind unless they had a damn good reason."

"Isn't the discovery of this globe reason enough?" cried Harper.

"Sure," Green nodded, "but Miss Van Horn didn't discover the globe until *after* that ship had gone."

"Maybe they had another reason! Maybe it's just a coincidence!"

"Okay, Harper," said Green, quietly. "Maybe this and maybe that. You're just wild guessing now and we can't afford to guess. You'll admit that I'm at least as interested as you are in nailing a Lindite boat? Thanks. Now let's see what we have."

He turned the globe around in his hands, brooding.

"The one thing we can be reasonably sure of is the fact that the Lindite ship, whichever one it is, doesn't yet know that anyone suspects it's here. And if we can keep that knowledge from them a little longer, maybe we can be led to it."

"How?" Harper said.

For an answer, Green set the white globe down on a table and fixed his gaze on it. He continued looking at it for a full minute, and then, slowly, the globe shuddered slightly and moved vertically into the air. All at once Green

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let out his breath and the globe hit the table with a sharp thud.

"I've seen one or two of these before," Green said, bitterly. "Will power works them. *Will power!* Think of it!" He bit his heavy lips and stared at the globe in fascination until sweat fogged his glasses. "Let me give you the whole picture," Green went on. "It's an old story . . .

"This lad went up to a gambling ship for a night's fun. The minute they saw him they knew they had a prospect, because he was rich, and only the rich can't afford to lose. Sounds odd, doesn't it? It's true. The ordinary youngster couldn't lose enough to get in deep! But this boy went there, maybe had a drink too much, and there he was, playing fairly steep stakes for a few hours. He probably lost no more than a few thousand dollars—but they had him hooked! Because only a wealthy man could return for another try. Get it?

"So he came back," Green continued, "and he lost again."

"Crooked wheels or dice?" Harper asked.

"Never. Lindite ships play absolutely legitimately because they are playing for lives, not money. They can't afford to be caught with a crooked game that might lead to an investigation of the ship. They play honestly, and the laws of chance on dice and their wheels give them an edge of about twenty-five per cent in the long run."

GREEN took off his glasses and polished them deliberately before he went on.

"Well, after maybe a few nights of playing, the boy was in deep. Too deep. He took the usual course. Only the wealthy have opportunities at money that isn't theirs; this boy took his bank's money. He kept trying to win, but the games had him licked on percentage."

"What if he had won back his money?" said Harper, then added, "I see. If he had won, then he'd be out. But they had plenty like him, and all of them couldn't win. Someone would have to lose."

"Exactly. This boy fell among those who lost. We know that because the globe tells the story. He was finally in so deep that he was ready to listen to anything . . . *That was when they offered him the ultimate gamble!* He could get back double what he had lost —if he took the white globe! He accepted, and took their Drink of Honor."

Green looked at Harper and said, "Ever hear of it?"

Harper nodded.

"It's a drug, isn't it?"

"So they say," Green said somberly. "No one knows; we know only its effects.* The drink is an unbelievably powerful compulsive agent. It destroys the will, perhaps, or the memory. Either the man cannot say where he got the globe or he doesn't remember. He knows only what he must do with it. The Drink of Honor, whatever hellish drug it is, compels one to go through with the test in a limited time, and if the test fails, to surrender oneself, leaving

* Tests on two refugees from Lindar by Dr. A. A. Kingsley, as well as on small quantities of the drug known as the Drink of Honor which were found on captured Lindite vessels, definitely appear to prove the contention that the drug acts on the will. This, according to the researches of Prof. Worth and others, was an absolute necessity for the Lindite aim in bringing slaves to Lindar. So horrible and difficult is the world of Lindar to humans that the slightest desire to leave is enough to upset the balance which Dr. Stevens has named the *trauma*—or the will to survive. Humans with free will must invariably experience the desire, rather the driving urge, to leave. Such a desire will prove fatal very quickly if the human remains. The tragedy is further deepened by the fact that he cannot leave.

Unfortunately, the rapid deterioration and death of the refugees put an end to the valuable experiments.—Ed.

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no clue."

A shudder swept through Lois as she asked,

"What is the test?" She was sitting limply in a chair, her face blanched and fearful.

"Did you see what I did to the globe?" said Green. "Anyone can do it—to an extent. It responds to will power. There is nothing inside, the globe is a solid mass of some unknown substance that comes from the ancient mines of Lindar. Will power can make it move in any direction. The test is to keep it in mid-air for one hundred seconds."

Slowly, Harper said,

"And it can be done?"

"It has been done. There's nothing phoney about that. The globe is as honest as their games, and there is one of the great reasons for the Lindite successes. Once in a long while somebody does beat the test, and if that happens, the compulsion to remain silent is gone." Green laughed moodily. "Clever, isn't it? When they lose, they get advertising; the news spreads like wildfire—Lindites can be beaten."

"I've heard that," said Harper. "If the Lindites never lost, in time no one would take the chance. It's that chance that they dangle before you, that and their reputation for honesty."

"And what can the I.P. do against a set-up like that?" said Green. "Look at how the test works. You don't have to take it aboard their ship. They let you take the globe with you, take the test anywhere you want, within 200 miles of the ship, and inside of fifty hours.

"In complete privacy, you can practice raising this fiendish globe over and over, until you've done it dozens of times. When you're ready, you just tell yourself that you're going to take it. That's all there is to it—you just can do it, you've won. If you fail, you can try twice more, declaring to yourself each time that you are taking it. Three failures—" Green snapped his fingers viciously, "—finish!"

FOR the first time, Monte spoke.

"And then?" he asked, quietly.

"You go to the Lindite ship and give yourself up. No farewells, no letters, no clues. Nothing can stop you. You know you've failed three times. You've lost, and you go because you must go, because you took a certain little drink." An acid smile played on Green's lips. Between his teeth he said, "That's why they call it the Drink of Honor!"

"Suppose you win?" said Monte. "What happens to the globe?"

"You have fifty hours time," Green answered. "If it passes and you haven't taken the test, it's as if you lost, and you surrender to the Lindites of your own volition. But if you win—*the globe returns to the Lindite ship by itself!*"

"Ah-h-h," said Harper, drawing in his breath. "I begin to see what you meant, Max. You think the boy has been taking the test?"

"No doubt about it."

"And a large part of the fifty hours must be up?"

"It's hard to say, but it makes no difference. We'll just keep this lad under our eyes until fifty hours have passed, and then. . ." Green looked squarely at the youth, ". . . wherever this white globe goes, we'll be going with it. It must lead us to the ship!"

Green sat down on the arm of the couch and added,

"We'll probably have to call in the Tyuionian police, Miss Van Horn. With your father's influence, there's little chance of this leaking out."

"There's an excellent chance of it

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leaking out," said Harper. "This is a gambler's heaven. I should know," he smiled, grimly. "Why don't you call in the I.P.?"

"I have called them. They ought to be here within a few days, and it may be too late by then."

"A few days? Aren't they nearby, waiting?"

"Waiting for what?" said Green, impatiently.

"Didn't the I.P. send you here to scout a Lindite ship?"

"No one sent me," said Green, evenly. "I came here for you, Harper, and I'll go back with you when this is finished."

"A wiser and a wealthier man," said Harper. "A hundred thousand bucks wealthier."

The door leading to the hall had opened the least bit, and a deep, guttural voice said, "Wiser, perhaps, Mr. Green. . ."

The door swung open entirely. An eight foot Jovian stood at the threshold, big electric bolt guns in either of his two huge hands. He jutted his head forward to indicate another armed Jovian on the balcony outside. Both adjoining doors to the room opened, disclosing two more of the giant gunmen. Their pale skin, stretched tight across great, bony skulls, made them look like death-heads.

"Wiser, Mr. Green," the first Jovian repeated in hollow tones, "but hardly wealthier, not to mention your health."

"What do you want?" said Green, slowly sliding to his feet.

"A hostage," replied the Jovian, "a hostage in the event that your friends of the Colonial police should prove troublesome. We would therefore prefer taking you alive, Mr. Green, and unless you stop moving your hand towards your weapons, you may spoil our plans. Please put your hands over your head—all of you!" The last was a short, savage command, enforced by a sudden thrust of the guns.

"Search them, Otho," said the leader. The Jovian came in from the balcony and let his great hands feel out Monte's dart gun and the heat pistol that Green wore in a shoulder holster. "I see you gentlemen have your favorites," the leader observed, mockingly. "Now, Mr. Green, please precede me out of this room. Otho, the globe."

For a moment, Green hesitated, his muscular, short body poised for a leap. Harper grated,

"Don't be a fool, Max!"

The Jovian showed his long teeth in a leer, swinging the bolt guns easily. Green picked up his hat, shrugged and went out. The other Jovians followed him, and the leader, before he closed the door behind him, observed,

"Please be careful. You are not concerned in this."

THE instant the door closed, Harper sprang to the audivisor. He threw the switch in, but the screen remained dark and the short-long distress signal buzzed. The efficient Jovians had taken the precaution of wrecking the AV system.

"Monte!" Harper barked. "You stay—"

"Where are you going?" Monte cried. "The boy is safe and Max is none of our business. He's still out to get you!"

"He'll wind up on Lindar unless we help him!" Harper grated. "You stay here and watch the boy. Don't leave him for a minute. I'll be back as soon as I can!" He swung the door open, hesitated, crossed the room to Lois Van Horn and took her in his arms. Then he left.

He ran for almost five minutes before he caught a surface cab.

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"Police headquarters!" he cried. "As fast as this buggy'll go!" The Tyuionian driver swallowed and his little vehicle shot forward. Three minutes later a police car overtook them. Harper shouted to them and the pursuer became an escort. They tore through the wide, empty streets of Vhedy at break-neck speed, pulling up before the striped green lights of the Tyuionian police, brakes squealing in anguish.

Precious minutes flitted by while Harper argued with the desk Corporal in charge. The Corporal sent for his Sergeant, the Sergeant for a Lieutenant. Finally Colonel Greizz was awakened. He came down to his office, a huge black robe wrapped around his tiny body. He sat at his desk, stroking his grey goatee, listening to Harper. His thin fingers tapped the desk top; he said nothing until Harper finished.

"A most interesting story," the Colonel observed, mildly. "It is lacking however, in one or two particulars."

"You mean you don't believe me?"

"Hardly," said Greizz. "Especially in view of the fact that Mr. Van Horn, senior, never went nor intended to go to any bank. And this we know because he was here until half an hour ago, personally arranging for your deportation."

"Half an hour ago?" Harper repeated, "Then he should have returned home before I left. . ."

"That is exactly what I am thinking."

"But Green told me—"

The little Colonel rose and leaned forward.

"It is perhaps more to the point to mention what Lieutenant Green told *me*. We are entirely acquainted with your case, Mr. Harper. We manage to keep desperate criminals under surveillance despite the benevolence of our laws."

"Listen to me, you damned fool!" Harper cried. "Why don't you contact the I.P. patrol and see whether or not Green called them!"

The Colonel blanched in sudden anger. He whirled sharply and said to one of his aides:

"You have a full report from the I.P.?"

"Yes, sir. Contact established with the destroyer *Greystone*, six days out. No communications received from Lieutenant Green or anyone else in Tyuio. This is the first they knew of his being here."

Colonel Greizz faced Harper.

"You forget, Mr. Harper, that lies do not necessarily succeed because they are bold. Not only armed Jovians can foul an AV system, as you evidently seem to have done. And—"

"Your'e nuts!" Harper shouted. "What are you standing there for? Why don't you come back with me and investigate? I've got plenty of proof!"

The Colonel took off his robe and donned the tunic of his gray and white uniform. His birdlike eyes fixed Harper and he said,

"But of course I intend to investigate. Didn't you think I would?"

THE Van Horn mansion was completely dark when the cortege of police drew up. For some reason, the sight suddenly made Cary Harper feel sick.

"Hurry!" he cried, as the Colonel mounted the stairs beside him, flanked by half a dozen officers.

When they reached the front door, they noticed it was ajar. The house inside was dark and silent. At the Colonel's command, one of the officers shouted. Presently they heard a noise, then all at once the house was brilliantly lighted. An old, frightened man, clad in nightclothes appeared from a

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door in the east wing. He came toward them as if in a stupor, and behind him other faces peeped through the door from which he had come.

"Police?" he faltered. "Then. . . then audivisor is working? We called you a little while ago, but . . . but there was no answer. . . ."

"*You* called us?" Greizz queried. "What for?" The old man looked at the Colonel and took a staggering step backward to keep his balance. "Speak up, man!" said the Colonel, sharply. "Who are you? Who are those people in the other room? What are you afraid of?"

"I'm Stefan . . . the butler. Those are the other servants. . . ." The old man shook his head. "I heard . . . voices . . . fighting . . . woke up the others. There's no one in the house. The master . . . hasn't come home yet and . . . Miss Lois . . . isn't here either."

"What's the matter with you?" said Greizz. One of the officers had gone into the east wing; now he came out again, holding a handkerchief to his nose. "Get me someone who can talk," the Colonel said. "Faniff, what's wrong here?"

The officer coughed violently.

"The whole wing has been smothered with Uranian powder, sir," he choked. "Place is reeking with it. These servants were all put to sleep."

With a cry, Harper shook himself loose and bounded up the stairs to the room where he had left Monte. This room too was dark.

"Monte!" Harper shouted, frantically. "Monte, where are you?" He stumbled forward into the dark room and almost fell as he kicked a prostrate body.

The police had come into the room by then. Harper called to them to help him take the body out. The Colonel immediately ordered Harper to stop.

"Don't touch anything!" he shrilled. "Get a light in here, somebody!"

One of the officers flicked on his glowtube. The white circle of light touched about the room. The place looked as if it had been caught in an etherswirl; the heavy furniture lay broken and scattered, smashed lamps lay on the floor, the carpet was wrinkled and stained.

Then, just as the glowtube caught Cary Harper, a voice mumbled incoherently, coming from the still figure that lay on the floor. It was Monte. He opened his eyes and looked up at Harper and the Colonel until full consciousness had returned.

"Sorry, Cary," he whispered, "he got away. . . ."

THE next moment, Stefan, the aged butler, entered and turned on the auxiliary lights. Colonel Greizz stared at Monte curiously.

"What kind of nonsense is this?" he demanded.

"Can you speak, Monte?" said Harper, anxiously. "What happened? Where is Lois and the boy?"

Monte sat up and rubbed his head.

"Guess I'm all right," he said slowly. "Got a nasty crack on the head from that kid. Help me up."

Leaning on Harper, Monte got to his feet.

"They're gone?" he asked, looking about the room. "Then he's taken her with him. . . ."

"Who's taken who with whom?" the Colonel barked.

"Monte! For the love of—what happened?" Harper cried, trying to keep control of himself.

"I can't understand it. About ten minutes after you left, the kid suddenly started to get wild. He made a rush for the door and I stopped him. He kept looking at his watch and scream-

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ing he had to get out. It scared hell out of me. You never saw anything like it—"

Harper turned to the Colonel.

"You see it, don't you? The boy knew his time was up. The fifty hours were expiring and he had to get to the Lindite ship!"

"I see," the Colonel nodded. "Please continue."

"At first I thought I could manage, but the kid had suddenly gotten the strength of a demon. He kept yelling and throwing things and trying to get through the door after I blocked the balcony with the couch. He must have knocked me across the room a couple of times, but I was able to hold on. Then he stunned me just as I whacked him a solid punch, and we both went down. I yelled to Lois to tie him up with a curtain sash.

"She was almost as bad as he was. She was crying and pleading with him, and when she tied him up, she tied herself to him—"

"She did what?" Harper cried out.

"She tied the other end of the sash to her arm. Cary, I couldn't stop her! She screamed that if her brother was going to that ship, she was going with him! He acted as if he didn't know she was alive, like an animal in a cage, unable to hear us or even see us. He got up, dragging her along, and I threw a chair at the lamps. Then in the dark, I started for the door—when bang!—I ran into him and he brought something down on my head."

Harper wheeled on the Colonel.

"They've gone to the ship!" he cried, his face drawn and haggard. "If it leaves with them aboard, they're finished! You've got to get out a general alarm immediately!"

Colonel Greizz drew a deep breath and kept his birdlike eyes on Monte.

"I still don't understand how you expect to get away, Harper," he said. "It can't be that you imagine you'll be lost in the scramble?"

"What do you mean?" Harper asked, feverishly.

"I mean," rasped the Colonel, "that until each of these four missing persons turns up, you will be held for their murder!"

CARY HARPER recoiled. "Why, you—you—" he gasped.

"Not that I actually think you've committed murder," Greizz went on, evenly. "You've probably hidden them somewhere, a place where they can be kept out of sight until you're gone, eh, Harper?"

"Listen to me, you tinhorn, comic-opera cop!" Harper stormed. "Get that imbecilic brain of yours out of correspondence school detective lessons and do something! Why in hell would I come to you in the first place if I had any part in this? Can't you see that the Jovians drugged the servants? Didn't you hear what—"

"Silence!" the Colonel snapped. "Anyone, including you, might have drugged the servants—and fouled the AV system, as I told you. Tomorrow you were to be deported. Four people were vitally interested in that. Tonight those four people are missing! You came to me with a cock and bull story about Lindite ships, about Lieutenant Green having called for the I.P. Do you think I am a child?"

Harper clutched his head wearily.

"All right," he said, in a monotone, his eyes catching Monte's for a fraction of an instant, then turning away. "Let's hear the rest of it. I suppose I was going to steal a gun from you and shoot my way out?" he emphasized slightly.

"Hardly," said Greizz, grimly. "Not knowing that either Mr. Van Horn or Lieutenant Green had been to see me,

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you arranged this absurd display. *You* drugged the servants! *You* destroyed the AV system! *You* kidnaped the four people who were intent on your punishment! And I have no doubt that you intended sneaking off while we were hunting for your victims. That's why you came to me—to spread enough confusion to make good your escape! But there's—"

Standing to one side, apparently still dazed, or pretending to be dazed as Colonel Griezz had accused, Monte had been inconspicuous. A second after Harper had caught his eyes, he had begun. His slender, delicate fingers, educated and agile, had reached out just once. Then he took a slight step or two back, and when he was ready, he waved a hand to Harper. In his other hand he held the service heat gun he had picked out of an officer's holster!

It was Harper who interrupted the Colonel's speech. He pointed to Monte and said,

"My friend is a deadly shot, Colonel. Raise your hands and be quick about it!"

The Colonel let out a squeal of dismay as he saw the gun in Monte's hand, but one of the officers jumped back and pulled out his own weapon. Monte scowled imperceptibly and his heat gun flashed into a thin, brilliant ray of action. The slender beam of yellow-gold heat hissed across ten feet of space and caught the officer's gun squarely in its barrel! Instantly the gun became a mass of molten metal. The officer cried out in pain and fell to the floor, clutching his hand.

"Not a bad shot," Monte observed, dryly. "Only trouble is I'm out of practice . . . might miss the next time—the gun, I mean."

HARPER was breathing heavily, trembling with impatience. "Come here, all of you!" he ordered, pointing to the AV system. The police officers, reluctant yet wary of the heat gun that followed their every move, crossed to where Harper indicated.

With quick movements, Harper removed the screen from the audi-visor, exposing its gleaming metal innards.

"Stick your hands inside!" Harper grated. "You first, Colonel. Just put your hands in among the wires and tubes—up to the wrist."

The Colonel stuck his hands in among the maze of wires and coils. One after another, the other officers followed him, until they were all standing around the AV machinery, their hands inside. Then Harper took one of the officer's heat guns from its holster, cocked it—

"No," he said. "Monte, you do it. This needs your expert touch. Just tangle the boys up a little."

With a wry smile, Monte stepped forward. He adjusted the lever of the heat gun until its deadly beam was as thin as a strand from a spiderweb. Then, stepping up the AV machine, he played the bright line of heat among the wires with infinite care, fusing them together, melting down tubes and coils without touching any of the hands that were slowly, surely being imprisoned in the metal.

After a few moments, it was done: the police officers were securely locked to the huge machine, hand-cuffed! Then Monte opened the door until the metal sheath along its edge touched the metal case of the AV. With two quick bursts he had welded the machine and the great door together! Then he took several strips that Harper had meanwhile torn from the fibreglass curtains and helped gag the officers. The helpless police rolled their eyes in eloquent fury as Harper and Monte left them.

Stefan, the butler, was waiting in the

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hallway, astonished by the scene he had glimpsed. Harper took him by the arm and went down the stairs with him.

"Listen to me, Stefan," he said, soberly. "You don't know much about me. You've only seen me the two times I brought Miss Lois home. You love her, don't you, Stefan?" The old man nodded, tearfully. "Then you've got to help me. I love her too, Stefan. She's in terrible danger and I'm going to try to bring her home again. Go back to your quarters. Keep the other servants away. No matter what you hear happening back in that room, if you do hear anything, don't help them get out. You know nothing of their being there, understand?"

"I understand, sir," the old man quavered. "I'll pray for you."

"Pray hard!" Harper muttered as he ran to the door. Outside, he and Monte raced down the steps to the file of police vehicles. They jumped into one of them, and with Harper at the wheel, the three-wheeled machine spun around and roared back up the road along which they had come.

"Now what?" said Monte.

"I'm going up to try to find that Lindite ship!"

"Find it? How?"

The sweat stood out on Harper's brow as he careened around a corner, narrowly missing two pedestrians.

"I don't know how," he said, tersely. "But I've got to take the one chance I have. I can't think straight anymore . . ."

THE police car sped furiously through an intersection and swerved at the last instant to avoid a head-on collision.

"You can't drive straight, either," Monte choked. "Where are we going?"

"Here!" said Harper, spinning the car sharply into the street that housed the Vhedy headquarters of the Tyuionian police. The car shot into the police garage and stopped inches away from the far wall. Harper leaped out and grabbed the Sergeant in charge by the arm.

"Quick!" he snapped. "Get me a plane! Official business!"

"Huh?" said the startled Sergeant. "What kind of business?"

"Not yours, stupid!" Harper roared in official rage. "Do I get that plane or do you hunt a new job tomorrow?"

The Sergeant glanced quickly at the police car, blinked, and evidently decided to retain his job.

"Yes, sir!" he clicked. "Into the elevator, please."

There were nine or ten police planes in the roof hangars. Harper strode to one and snapped his fingers.

"This one!"

"But . . . but there's no insignia on it, sir," the Sergeant said.

"Am I in uniform?" Harper demanded, sharply. "Maybe I don't want to be recognized!" He leaned over the instrument board, checked the fuel supply and found it at capacity. Then he revved the double motors and shut them off for a moment. He took Monte's hand and shook it. "So long for now, Monte," he said, quietly. "Take care of—"

Monte shook his hand loose in disgust.

"You must be kidding," he snorted. "Where the hell do you think you're going alone? I'm fed up playing solitaire!" And he climbed into the plane. Harper stood undecided for a moment, then grinned the least bit and climbed in beside Monte, taking the controls. He signalled to the Sergeant and started up the helicopter motor. But the blast of the revving had brought the hangar police running to the scene. They came on the gallop to the Sergeant demand-

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ing to know what was going on.

"Official business!" the Sergeant barked, raising his hand in salute as the plane rolled by him. Quickly, the other police lined up and saluted at attention with him.

THE sky was a black field sown with stars. Far off, one of the three moons of Tyuio circled endlessly. There were colored dots of light, too—the navigation lights of nightbound ships and planes, flitting on and off like beacons. Occasionally the wind brought the soft hum of other motors. The rest was silence.

"What was that chance you were thinking of, Cary?"

"Maybe the Lindite ship hasn't left yet."

Monte asked,

"Because if it had, the kid wouldn't have felt the compulsion to go to the ship?" and Harper nodded. "Maybe," said Monte, "it left before they got to it . . . or after they got to it . . . "

"It's a chance. That's why I wanted a police plane without any markings, fast enough to make the rounds of the gambling ships."

"How will you know if you've found it? And if you do find it—what then?"

Harper brushed his face wearily.

"I don't know . . . I don't know," he repeated, tonelessly. "All I know is that I must find her!" He sat there like a man turned to stone. Many miles away a string of lights outlined a ship. Beyond it were others, dimmer in the distance. "Monte," Harper said, presently, "how many of those big boats do you count? Just the gambling boats—the ones with the double blue light."

Monte leaned forward.

"Seven. Why?"

"Because there were seven this afternoon, too!"

"So what?"

"Max Green said the *Venus Sapphire* had left!"

"He ought to know. Maybe a new one came in."

Harper swung the plane into a sharp port bank and crowded the already full throttle.

"Maybe," said Harper. He glanced at the control board: they were eighty miles up. The gambling ships were space-anchored in a huge circle at that level. In a few moments the little police plane sped by the first of the vessels and for a fleeting instant the mingled sounds of gaiety rushed by and were lost. Another ship grew large and disappeared to the starboard. Then the hull of an old liner loomed. The plane dove in, turned on its copter motors and hovered in mid-air close by the ship's bow.

On the vessel's bow, emblazoned in twinkling blue lights, was its name: *The Venus Sapphire.*

"It came back!" Monte gasped.

Harper maneuvered the plane closer to the ship's hangar. The two men looked down to a deck crowded with people in evening dress. From the upper deck strains of music and laughter floated down. The plane inched in, and through the great, clear windows of the gaming room they could see hundreds of people at the various boards.

"Cary," said Monte, hoarsely, "we can't go in there. This is a trap—that's why it came back!"

A quiet, ironic laugh came from Harper.

"It never left," he said. "I just figured it out. That little Colonel Greizz gave me the answer about an hour too late." He tried to steer the plane, but Monte put a hand over Harper's and locked the controls.

Harper pulled his hands free.

"Monte," Harper said, "Lois is aboard this ship and trap or no trap I'm

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going in. You can pull out anytime. Take the plane back with you."

Wordlessly, Monte withdrew his hands from the wheel.

HARPER maneuvered the plane through the lock and landed easily on the hangar deck. He got out after Monte, nodded to an attendant whom he recognized as the man he had batted out that afternoon. The attendant didn't know Harper; the action had been too swift. For a moment, everything that had happened since that afternoon rose up in Harper's mind. It seemed unbelievable. It was as if years had passed.

When they came out on the upper deck, Monte gripped Harper's arm and stood beside him, leaning against the rail.

"Cary," he said, tensely, "you've got to tell me—what are you going to do?"

Harper shrugged.

"Something kept this ship from leaving tonight, and that something has given us time. If we can locate Lois or her brother . . . there are hundreds of people aboard, and we're the only ones who know this is a Lindite ship. Maybe we could stir them up to do something. Meanwhile, we can't be in much danger while they're around."

"What's your plan?"

"We'll separate here. I'll be playing at the four-wheels. No one knows you here, so you'll do a little snooping. If you get the slightest idea about where Lois is, come to my wheel and play on double-zero, double-black. Then meet me up here."

Harper lit a cigarette and walked away quickly. He descended to the middle deck and entered the gaming room. The place was in an uproar: somebody was riding a streak at the dice table and scores of people had gathered around to wish him luck. The player, a middle-aged man with a shiny bald head, kissed his wife for luck, as he gleefully howled, and rolled his entire stake. A loud chorus of disappointed groans rose, the dice went to another player and the crowd broke up.

Unobtrusively, Harper went to the four-wheels. The Martian croupier who had been there in the afternoon was gone, and in his place another red-haired Martian stood at the head of the open table. Harper bought some chips and began to play. He placed small stakes on the squares indiscriminately, winning once or twice and then losing back what he had won. He played lackadaisically, keeping his attention on the doors.

Once, from some women players near him he heard something that instantly interested him. One of the women mentioned a friend of hers who had supposedly lost large sums at the four-wheels.

"Personally," the woman said, deprecatingly, "I don't believe it, but what irritates me is the way she refused to answer any AV calls for the past two days."

Harper knew what that meant. Days later her friends would find that woman unaccountably missing: it was only too true that she had lost large sums . . . and then she had been offered a chance to get back double her losses . . .

Harper turned back from the door in time to see a pile of chips being put down on the square reserved for double-zero, double-black. He glanced up at Monte, placed his own bet, and when the wheels had stopped, he went out and climbed the stairs to the upper deck.

MONTE came after a few moments. Harper called to him from the shadows where he stood partly concealed, and Monte stood beside him.

"Went down to the lower deck,"

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Monte said in a subdued voice that betrayed his excitement. "Came across a little room there, sign outside said 'Crew Members Only'. Thought I'd have a look. I opened the door and shut it fast—four or five Jovians sitting inside, smoking long pipes. What got me was a big, metal-studded door in back. Seemed to me it led to engine room, so I went upstairs and found that the engine noises came from a spot thirty feet away! Couldn't be anything but a hidden room . . ."

Monte let his voice taper into silence as a lovely, dark-haired girl, escorted by a bearded man, walked by.

Harper waited, then asked,

"Did the Jovians recognize you?"

"Can't say. Maybe I wasn't fast enough. Too startled. Anyway, there's a restaurant galley between the lower and middle decks, close to the spot I figured was over the hidden room. Waiters passing in and out all the time, so I couldn't take too many chances. The galley was hot as hell. I figured it had to have ventilators and it did.

"I tore the top off a ventilator and there was a room down there, all right. With all the noise from the galley I couldn't hear much, but there was an argument going on. One of the voices was the most peculiar I ever heard—low, soft, but it carried marvelously. Other voice was muffled, but seemed angry. Heard him say they had to get away from Tyuio fast.

"The soft voice said they'd been working the territory so well they couldn't leave yet. Too many people having their fifty-hour deadline tonight. They expected maybe ten, fifteen more by morning.

"The other voice shouted something, then I heard what they'd done with the senior Van Horn. The Jovians caught him at the door, drugged him and put him in his own garage. By morning he would be out of it, he kept shouting, and the whole I.P. would be on its way here. He said the Lindites were too greedy, someday they'd overreach themselves.

"The soft voice started laughing, saying this ship was faster than any I.P. ship . . ."

Harper clutched Monte's arm and put his fingers to his lips. In a moment, the dark-haired girl and the bearded man sauntered by. The girl was laughing at something and the man kept saying,

"Please, dear . . ."

Then, just as Monte was on the point of resuming, the bearded man left the girl and started walking back, as if he had forgotten something. He walked directly to the shadows where Harper and Monte stood, and said, in a matter-of-fact voice,

"Am I correct in assuming that you gentlemen are looking for a Miss Lois Van Horn?"

In the sudden silence, Harper's voice came softly.

"Hello, Max," he said. "Thought I'd find you here."

Maxwell Green nodded and said,

"Follow me quietly. And in case you're thinking of saying anything to other passengers, remember that I can yank this beard off in a second . . . in which event I am Lieutenant Green of the Colonial I.P. and you are a wanted criminal."

SEVERAL feet away, to either side of them, giant Jovians had appeared in the semi-gloom of the upper deck. Evidently they had recognized Monte after all. Harper decided a gun battle here would be worse than useless.

They followed Green down to the lower deck, to the room with the sign, "Crew Members Only." Jovians were stolidly sitting about, the air heavy with smoke from their long, hooked pipes.

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In one wall of the room was the metal-studded door which Monte had mentioned.

At a signal from Green, one of the Jovians searched Harper and Monte and found the heat guns they had taken from the police. Green raised his eyebrows and said,

"I see how you got here. Colonel Greizz must be even less efficient than I thought."

He rapped on the studded door and went in, holding the door open for Harper and Monte. There was no one inside and for a moment Green seemed annoyed. Then he motioned the two men to sit down and sat down himself. The room was superbly furnished, carpets made of the fur-like Neptunian wool lay on the floor, the walls were paneled with black-grained Venusian woods. Green fished out his glasses and put them on, looking with interest at Harper.

"Can't wear these with the beard," he said, smiling. "The minute I put on these thick lenses, I'm Maxwell Green again, with a beard." He offered the cigar box, shrugged at their refusal and lit one himself.

"Tell me, Harper," he said, "how you discovered I was in this."

"What are you driving at?"

"I'll ask questions. I asked you one already."

"You can go to hell."

"Probably will, what's more," Green laughed. He added, "I've a deal to offer you, Harper, a deal you may like. But you won't accomplish anything sitting here and burning up."

Presently Harper said,

"It was Colonel Greizz that gave me the lead. I told him what I thought was the truth—Van Horn going to the bank, you calling the I.P., the Jovians coming for the globe. He only laughed at me, and he said that lies didn't necessarily succeed because they were bold . . ."

"Please go on."

"It didn't mean anything to me then. But when I saw the *Venus Sapphire* was still here, I realized that all the evidence I'd had that she had left was your word. That was all the evidence I had for anything I'd said! It all jelled then . . . and I saw that your lies had succeeded merely because they were so bold that they left no room for doubt."

"I see," said Green, thoughtfully. "I thought perhaps I had slipped up somewhere. Finding you in Tyuio threw me off my stride, I'll confess. You see, I didn't come here for you. My business was—well, you might say financial, chiefly."

"Whatever the Lindites pay you, said Harper, "won't make up for that day when you do slip. You'll go on selling out the I.P. and protecting the Lindites for just so long. And you'll probably be one of the richest men that ever died in the lethal chamber."

Green smiled fitfully.

"It should appeal to you, Harper. It's quite a gamble, you see, and the pay-off is enough, for instance, to make a hundred thousand dollar reward ridiculous. Men like you, calm, clear-headed, capable—"

"Let's hear the rest of it."

GREEN pursed his lips and made a deprecating gesture.

"You don't like it, do you? Well, hear me out. I'm on a spot, Harper, but my spot is your spot. I can't take you back to the I.P. anymore. In a way I'm sorry I ever started this whole thing. I spotted you at the Rhon-Vhedy Plaza hotel and I couldn't resist the try at nailing you. A regrettable mistake, but the set-up seemed perfect—you seeing the Van Horn girl, I knowing her brother was in deep to the Lindites

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here . . ."

He sighed,

"Well, that's water over the dam now. Even if no one believed you at the I.P. I couldn't afford to let you talk. And in spite of the fact that I hate you more than I've ever hated anyone, I recognize your ability and your worth. We need good men here. So, briefly, take it or leave it."

"Suppose I decide to leave it?"

"I should be very grateful. This gracious offer is not mine, you see. It seems that your doggedness and foolhardy courage has an appeal for the Lindites who employ me. They want you. But, should you refuse, the alternative would be what I proposed to do with you in the first place—feeding you to the atomic furnaces that run this ship."

"On the other hand," Harper said, "I might take your offer and then turn you in the first chance I got."

Maxwell Green flicked the ash from his cigar and his eyes met Harper's.

"Hardly. If you accept, you will stay aboard this ship and come with us to Lindar. Only the Lindites could then acclimatize you for the outer world again, and even then you would have to return to Lindar at least once every two years. Betrayal would end your chances of returning . . . and of living much longer . . ."*

Cary Harper rose and started pacing the room. Green watched him carefully, watched him exchange mute glances with Monte that were an admission of hopelessness. Then Harper said,

"What about Lois and her brother? Where do they fit in?"

"They don't. You may be amazed to learn that I had no intention even of allowing young Ralph Van Horn to be taken — once you brought the whole thing out into the open. The elder Van Horn didn't believe you, but if his son and daughter disappeared . . ." Green smiled again. "There will be other disappearances tonight. The truth will be known by tomorrow. Van Horn is powerful enough to make it very hot for us. It would be idiotic not to let his children alone now."

"You're lying, Green," Harper said, slowly.

"Don't be a fool! Compare it with the facts you have. Only you two men know I'm in this, correct? As far as the Van Horns are concerned, I was kidnaped by the Lindites. They saw me taken away by their Jovians. I arranged that because I wanted a foolproof exit. If I had wanted either the girl or her brother, I could have had them taken, too. Correct? The fact that I didn't shows I was interested only in getting out of it. When I return, I'll have an excellent yarn to tell, you may be sure."

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* Scientists have long been interested in the repeated stories that the Lindites have discovered a way of acclimatizing humans to the outer world, even though the process is possible only upon those who have spent but a short time upon Lindar.

Lindites are reputed to use this means as their way of retaining those who aid them. Martians, Jovians, Venusians, Humans, etc., are first taken to Lindar for a brief period—enough to make imperative their return at certain intervals to Lindar. After each visit, possible only by trusted confederates who are undoubtedly well paid for their tie to the world of Lindar, they are again acclimated to the outside world.

It is believed that if the Lindites could extend this process, eventually they could solve the problem of bringing in enough free-willed help. Competent authorities have denied this possibility, and indeed, the Lindites themselves seem to know it can never be done because of the ever-growing necessity for their strange atmospheric element as residence increases.

There has also been conjecture as to whether this process is the one used by the Lindites in their rare excursions to the outer world. It is undoubtedly true that these excursions take place, as witness the several instances of capture of Lindites aboard their vessels, cunningly hidden beyond detection of any instruments, and discovered only by the methodical taking apart of entire vessels which were known to have a Lindite aboard them.—Ed.

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"So they go free, eh?"

"Certainly. They may even have been taken back to Tyuio by now—"

ONE of the wall panels had slid open, and through it had stepped a figure so strange and compelling that Harper stared at it as if he were petrified. There, returning Green's low bow, stood a man who looked so old that he seemed as ageless as history. Of medium build, with a small, wrinkled face and eyes that were black and fathomless, he appeared as fragile and delicate as old china. Every vein stood out in his white hands, and the skin of his face was the color of parchment.

He wore a multi-colored robe which reflected every particle of light in a magnificent, ever-changing sheen that seemed to be made of myriad diamonds and precious stones placed together in a mosaic. He gathered the robe around him as if he were cold, and sat down in the chair Green had vacated.

It was apparently an eternity later that Harper knew he was in the presence of a Lindite, one of the fabulous beings of interplanetary lore, beings about whose ability to leave Lindar scientific controversies had raged for years. This was one of the last of the Lindites, one of less than a thousand of his kind, fighting for survival.

He regarded Harper and Monte with interest and said,

"I am afraid Mr. Green is mistaken in some of the things he said." His voice struck Harper and Monte simultaneously: this undoubtedly was the strange voice that Monte had overheard earlier. It was incredibly low, sometimes like a sigh, other times like a note from an old violin, but it filled the room with its power. "I have followed your conversation with interest," he added, "and I must dissuade you from any false promises."

"They have not promised falsely, Lanna," said Green. "We have—"

"It is you who have made the false promises," said the Lindite, indicating Green. "The young man you speak of, Ralph Van Horn, and his sister, will not be permitted to leave this ship."

Green appeared bewildered by the Lindite's words.

"You cannot mean that Lanna, not only because I have explained to you the great necessity for returning them, but because you have no claim on the girl."

Sitting there stonily, Harper heard the Lindite say,

"There is no necessity in this universe, save the necessity for Lindar to live on. As for my claim on the girl, she accepted the globe for her brother's freedom, and she failed. She therefore belongs to Lindar."

Suddenly Harper leaped up.

"What does he mean, Max?" he cried. "It can't be that Lois . . . "

Green's face had blanched. He nodded quickly to Harper and said:

"That's exactly what it does mean. The girl took the three tests with the globe, gambling her own freedom for her brother's!"

"You can't do this!" Harper shouted in a frenzy. "You've got to let her go!"

"Shut up, Harper!" Green cried, facing the Lindite. "Listen to me, Lanna. I have served you long and well, but now you are placing my life—all our lives—in jeopardy. The I.P. is strong, it is powerful, and if they ever get a lead to me I'm through! They'll torture the truth out of me if they have to!"

"You will be strong," said the Lindite, implacably. "You are a clever man and you will work out your salvation. Together with your new comrade, Mr. Harper, you will be able to

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stand against their suspicion, for was it not he who first told them of our ship?"

"Just try me!" Harper cried. "I'll help Green with an alibi that'll send him to a place where there's nothing but cyanide fumes and a dozen official witnesses! And if I go to the furnace now, he knows that he won't be far behind!"

"No!" Green muttered, horror-stricken. "You must reconsider, Lanna. I am a valuable man. I have served you too well for this!"

"Men like you and Harper can be bought," said the Lindite, softly. "Or they can be forced, impressed into our service. But Lindar needs slaves, slaves who come of their own free will, and these cannot be bought. Slaves are the life-blood of Lindar, and they must be murtured into their slavery carefully. They cannot be bought, and each is more valuable to us than a hundred free-willed confederates like you or this Mr. Harper, who are bound to us only by their need to return to Lindar briefly, taking our drugs and fleeing again, thinking of ancient Lindar as a curse and abomination."

SICK at heart and ghastly-looking, Green covered his face with his hands. Suddenly he screamed.

"You can't do this to me! If you had left when I told you, this would never have happened!" It was apparent then that Green's had been the other voice that had urged the Lindite to leave, in the conversation Monte had overheard. The same terror that had inspired that plea made him quiver now. "Your greed will catch up with you yet!" he shouted. "You must let them go!"

The Lindite hadn't stirred. He turned his head away from Green and intoned gently:

"I did not want to tell you this, Mr. Green. You forced me to speak the truth. Lindar has its honor as it has its need. You must have known that in a choice between any number of free men and a slave that we would take the slave."

All at once Harper got up and stood before the Lindite.

"Am I, too, valuable to you as a slave?" he asked, softly.

The Lindite nodded.

"If the girl had succeeded in her test with the globe, would she have been set free together with her brother?"

"The honor of Lindar is inviolate."

"Then would you stake my freedom as a stake against the lives of my friends—my friend Monte, the girl I love, and her brother?"

"Cary! You can't!" Monte cried. "I won't let you!"

Harper caught Monte and thrust him away savagely. Haggard, he stared at the Lindite, waiting for the answer.

"I never knew," said the Lindite, quietly, "that a man whose life had been spent in gambling would be fool enough to gamble for his life."

"I have no life without her," said Harper. "I want to be with her, whether in the hell of Lindar or in this world. It would not be worth living if I had to go on helping your kind enslave mine."

The Lindite rose and pressed his hand against a panel. It slid open and the Lindite went through.

"Come," he said, motioning to Harper and Monte. "You will take the Drink of Honor."

AS HARPER followed the aged Lindite through the panel, the lights that had been on the other side went out. In the darkness, the Lindite robe glowed with a soft phosphorescence and Harper followed it. He felt himself

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walking through a room, and it seemed to him that there were people in the room, people on all sides of him, but he couldn't see them. He could almost feel their presence, hear their breathing. . . He shook off the delusion.

When there was light again, Harper turned behind him and saw that a door had closed behind, so silently that he hadn't heard. He was now completely alone with the Lindite in a small, circular room that was completely bare, save for a table the top of which was deeply convex. It seemed to be formed of a glistening metal that reflected the light of the Lindite's robe.

The Lindite touched his hand to the table. The convex, hemispheric top parted and a tiny platform rose from the interior of the table. There were two objects on the platform. One was a small white globe, the other a fragile, shallow glass. The Lindite silently picked up the glass and held it out to Harper.

"This," said the Lindite, "is our Drink of Honor."

Harper took the glass.

"One thing more," he said. "My friend in the other room—surely there is some way to separate his fate from mine? He came only because of me, and if he could—"

"Impossible."

Harper looked at the glass. There were only a few drops of liquid in it, pale red drops that rolled against the transparent sides. To drink them was to make an irrevocable bargain . . . the bargain that Lois had made and lost. His eyes lifted to the white globe . . .

"There is little time," came the Lindite's voice.

Harper raised the glass to his lips and drank.

The strange liquid was like a searing acid. The tiny drops burned like fire, coursing down his throat, tearing at his chest. Harper gulped the air in hoarse breaths. His eyes dimmed, and through the mist that covered them, he could see the wavering figure of the imperturbable Lindite, like a picture painted on a veil.

Then the Lindite looked at the white globe, and as if in response to an inaudible command, the sphere rose evenly from the table and came floating through the air toward Harper. Harper held out his hand and let the empty glass fall softly to the carpeted floor, and the globe came to rest in his open palm.

"I must ask your pardon for the strength of your drink," said the Lindite. "It was a concentrate, because you have but a single hour to fulfill our bargain. Now you may leave here. The ship is yours."

THE Lindite pointed in the direction from which they had come, and as Harper turned, he saw that the door had opened. But instead of the darkness through which he had walked, there was now light. He went to the doorway and instantly withdrew. There were people in that room, many of them, just as he had felt. For a moment it seemed less important to wonder why they had been in darkness, why they had been silent—and were still silent—than it was to conceal the white globe.

For that alone had become paramount. Through the numbness that had grown around him, starting from a white-hot core deep inside, a core that still burned from the liquid's path, Harper knew one thing above all others: he had to hide the globe from everyone.

Clutching the globe in his right hand, he buried the hand deep in a pocket of his coat. Thoughts were racing through

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his mind, thousands of swift conjectures, of possibilities and alternatives, and over everything, he felt the great weight of one oppressive thought, the knowledge of what depended on his success. The globe and failure. . . failure and the globe. . . revolving in his brain like a pinwheel, flashing, burning, destroying everything else.

Like a man in a dream, he staggered to the door again and stepped through, and it occurred to him that the room was filled with strangers, and he had to keep it from them, to hide every trace, every visible shred of evidence of what had happened to him. He had to be Mr. Harper, walking jauntily through one of the ship's lounges.

And yet this was no lounge. These were no passengers. These were men and women, dressed in various costumes —this one in a business suit, that one in white sports clothes, another in night-clothes and a robe gathered about him. They were silent, morose, staring people, sitting together and saying nothing. It was as if Harper had been stunned into immobility himself, and with it had come deafness. . .

But this was the room through which he had passed, he remembered. This was the room that had been dark, the one between the proposal of the bargain and its consummation. Then all at once, Harper knew. This was the room in which were hidden the victims of the Lindites, the fresh, living corpses that had been harvested by the weeks of Lindite work in the vicinity of Tyuio!

And these were the people, the unspeaking and unspoken to slaves of Lindar, hidden from his sight before he had taken the Drink of Honor and now freed to his gaze, now that he too was bound to Lindar. These were the people to whom the darkness and the light were of no consequence, who had heard him pass and said nothing.

If all this was so, then here in this room. . . Harper's eyes wandered until he saw them. Seated on a straight-backed chair was Ralph Van Horn, and not far away, but not facing him, seemingly not even conscious of his existence, was his sister Lois!

FOR an instant, Harper felt the impulse to cry out to them, to shout and run to them, but something conquered the impulse. He had to be natural, to act as if nothing had happened, and he could say nothing. He walked calmly across the room and stopped before the girl. After an interminable pause, she looked up at him.

She knew him; Harper saw that at once. Her eyes traveled over him, lit for an instant with the gleam of recognition, then her gaze fell away. She sat dressed in a gown of black satin, radiant, yet lifeless and silent. Harper wanted to empty his bursting heart to this girl who had so insanely gambled away her life, but he felt it was impossible for him to utter a word.

He turned away and the paneled wall opened for him. He entered the room where he had met the Lindite. Monte and Maxwell Green were still there. Harper halted momentarily, conscious of the fear and fascination with which they regarded him. As he tried to walk by them, Monte took him by the arm.

"Cary—you didn't do it?"

"Do what? Take that idiotic gamble?" Harper laughed. "Not after I got a good look at some of those people who failed."

Green croaked at him.

"So you took the easy way?" he sneered, his thick-lensed eyes darting everywhere. "Turned smart, eh?" He came forward and spat out, "Not you, sucker! What are you holding in that hand that's in your pocket?"

A wave of helplessness came over

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Harper. All he could think of was denying Green's words, though he knew it was useless. His hand only clutched the globe more tightly, and blindly, he ran from the room into the little chamber where the Jovians still sat. He rushed by them and out to the deck, climbing up to the dark top-side.

And here, alone, he stood against the rail and breathed in the cool night air, filling his choking lungs. Everything seemed to have changed. The brightness of the stars, the quartered moon, the be-jeweled great shadow that was Tyuio, these things were now distant, remembered from a vague past. The present was filled with a great urgency, a need to fulfill a task that burned in his brain.

How quiet it was on the ship. From the stern of the upper deck he could hear the sharp explosions of a motor as a party of visitors left the ship's hangar in a plane. There were still people below in the gaming room, but Harper knew that in an hour or little more, there would be hardly any of them left. And in a little less than an hour, all the time that was left to him . . .

He realized then that he had been staring at the globe all the time he had been on deck. He kept staring at it, and after a moment it rose from his hand and remained in mid-air, an inch over his outstretched palm. Harper remained motionless and the globe hung, moment after moment, revolving slowly on an invisible axis.

From this moment on the test begins. It's still there . . . holding . . . it must hold . . . must . . . must . . . it's wavering! What will I do . . . now . . . back up . . . almost fell then . . . must hold . . . how much longer . . . how much time is gone . . . I can't fail now . . . this means everything . . . the stakes are too great . . . Lois . . . Lois . . . we're all in this now . . . holding . . . how much longer . . . I can't . . . I can't . . . can't . . .

The globe fell to the deck with a sharp thud and lay still. Harper clung heavily to the rail, completely exhausted. His body was filled with pain, his mind was blank. Sweat poured down his face until his eyes were filled and great sobs came from him.

LITTLE by little, thoughts returned. It had been easy at first. He had held the globe well. What had happened? He looked at the globe and suddenly kneeled and picked it up. It shimmered in his hands with a strange inner light, and as he kept his fearful gaze on it, it seemed to resolve itself into a head. And then he saw a mouth appearing, smiling cynically at him, and he heard its cynical voice . . .

"You begin to recognize the enormity of your task, Mr. Harper."

It was the Lindite who had spoken. He had come out of nowhere, and he stood beside Harper at the rail, the wind whipping his cloak about his frail figure.

"I admire your courage," his flute-like voice continued, almost compassionately. "But it is wasted. Your fate abandoned you when our paths crossed in Uranus. But you did not know that? You did not know that it was we of Lindar who had you branded a criminal?"

The Lindite smiled sadly.

"Consider. You are wanted for political intrigue and assault. Your political intrigue consisted merely of aiding in the overthrow of the rulers of Uranus, the rulers who were bound to us. You did not know that, did you? But our Mr. Green was there, you remember. At the time you thought he represented the I.P. in trying to quell the rebellion, and when he arrested you one day, you fought him, and made yourself liable

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for assault charges.

"But our Mr. Green was there to protect the interests of Lindar. We failed then, and later, when the I.P. recognized the new rulers of Uranus, you were pardoned for your part in the intrigue. You would have been a free man then, instead of a hunted criminal, if the assault charges against you had been removed.

"But we told Mr. Green to keep the charges in force. You fled from planet to planet, until finally you came to Tyuio, and our paths crossed again. Consider then, how fate abandoned you and gave you to us. For if the I.P. had ever known that Mr. Green was ours, you would again have been free . . . as you never will be again . . ."

The Lindite began to move away, and his voice floated to Harper on the dying wind.

"There is little time . . . hurry!"

He was gone.

His words had struck Harper with crushing force. At last, too late, Harper understood everything. Even at the time when he had first met Green, the miserable traitor had been in alien employ. At every step of the way there had been freedom, if only Harper had known in time. And now that it was too late . . . What did all this matter? What did anything matter? There was something to be done yet! He had to fight! There was still a chance if he could fight!

HARPER held the globe away from him. He suddenly pulled his hand from under it. It hung suspended. It was so simple, after all. He had held it there before . . . how long? Not long enough, or he would have been released. But it could be done! Here, practising, he had held it for longer than a minute, surely!

Suddenly he reached out and grabbed the globe, hiding it. Something had moved in the darkness, there near one of the funnels. Harper slowly advanced until he made out a crouching figure.

"Cary," came Monte's voice. "There's something—"

"Get away!" Harper snarled. "Get away from me!"

Monte came out of his hiding place, talking swiftly, trying to explain, but Harper rushed in and with a single blow sent Monte sprawling to the deck. He stood over his friend, bewildered and enraged all at once, unable to understand what had made him strike Monte, yet unable to say a word. He had no time to explain. He had to be alone.

He ran down the deck to the bow. There was no one in sight now.

I've got to do it this time . . . it's simple . . . all right . . . I say to myself I'm doing it . . . I've begun . . . it's holding . . . it's holding . . . it will hold this time . . . Lois . . . I can see her face . . . lost . . . we're all . . . lost . . . it's slipping! There . . . hold up . . .

His heart was beating like a hammer, each beat an endless second on the road to eternity, his mind on fire, his eyes glazed, intent on the sinister globe that floated on air.

Lord, I've gambled before . . . but never like this, you fool . . . you are a fool . . . hold it! . . . fool . . . fool . . . why can't I get her face out of my mind . . . how much time now . . . it keeps getting lower . . . raise it . . . fool . . . all the time Green was after me I was free . . . her face . . . I'll see it always . . . we'll be together . . . hold! . . . together in a living hell . . . I could have gotten away . . . he'd have given me to the I.P. but if I had known it wouldn't have mattered . . . they're all depending on me now . . . all. Monte . . . her brother . . . Lois . . . I'm going to hell . . . fight! fight!

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. . . fool . . . Lord it keeps slipping . . . I've got to . . . they're all depending . . .

But the globe had fallen again.

HARPER had gone to his knees, his body limp with fatigue, one hand hanging over the rail. Still the thoughts knifed through his reeling brain, repeating over and over again insistently that he had to win, that the stakes were too great to lose now. Picture after picture welled up in his consciousness. He was filled with despair such as he had never known. He was failing! One last chance remained, and he knew now that he was lost, and with him, the others.

He lay there, unable to move, and felt the shadow come between him and the star-studded sky.

"Monte!" he gasped.

"Yes, Monte!" came the harsh answer. "You asked for it, sucker! I kept telling you over and over but you wouldn't listen. Now you know!"

Monte wheeled and walked away, then suddenly he returned.

"Or maybe," Monte grated, "you haven't heard? Maybe the Lindite didn't tell you the whole thing. Maybe he's waiting until you've tried for the third time." He stuck his head down to where he could look into Harper's eyes. "Your little girl friend put one over on you! She never took their gamble or their drink! Her part of the bargain was to make you believe she did—because the Lindite wanted you, and he knew that was the only way he'd get you!

"You hear me, don't you?" Monte cried. "All she ever wanted was her brother's freedom, sucker! She didn't want any part of a criminal gambler. When she came here, the Lindite offered her her brother's life against yours and she grabbed the chance! Grabbed it without a second thought, do you hear?"

He stood erect and held a hand up.

"Listen!" he cried.

A woman's voice lifted high and clear in lilting laughter.

"That's her!" Monte laughed, sneeringly. "You recognize that voice, don't you? The voice that said 'I love you' and you believed it! Listen to her laugh! She's going home now, and her brother's with her!"

The woman's voice was like a knife in Harper's heart. He listened to Monte in slow comprehension, at first unable to move, then unwilling. It couldn't have been Lois's voice . . . and yet . . .

"But I saw her there among them!" Harper cried out. He was pleading with Monte now, begging him to unsay what he had said.

"You don't know what you saw!" Monte grated. "They sat her in there and told her to say nothing . . . and you were doped up with that lousy drink they'd given you! You're through, sucker! You were willing to drag all of us down with you, me included!"

He jutted his chin forward.

"Take a poke at me now, tough guy! Go ahead—sell me out and then swing at me! What are you waiting for? You're through and you know it! And while you can still remember anything, remember this—that fall guy Monte woke up at last! You hear me? I'm safe! I took their proposition! I'm going in with them and I'm going to live happily ever after while you're rotting away on Lindar! You taught me that, sucker! Watch out for number one! So long!"

After awhile his footsteps had died away.

LITTLE by little Harper's mind cleared, like a slate that had been wiped clean. He could feel the wind on his face again, and his breath came

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evenly. He rose from the deck and stood against the rail, and then he was laughing quietly. But the pain was gone. Everything was gone. His reason for living and for fighting was gone. It was all over then, over in two chances, not three. That third chance had never come, after all. The fight against time, against odds, had been lost before it began.

The laughter healed him, made him whole again. All his life he had gambled, and he knew sometimes one lost. All right then, lost. It was something to know that the game had been crooked all along. One had no friends in this world, one had only one's self.

His laughter rang clear and sharp now. He had felt a little pang, and he knew what it meant. His time limit was almost up; it was time for that third test. The drug they had given him didn't understand that he had lost already. Mechanically, it was reacting on his will, telling him he had to fulfill his bargain to the letter. Tears were rolling down his cheeks as he laughed.

He held the globe carelessly in his hand, then tossed it up in the air. Halfway down, he cried out: "Stop!"

The globe stopped in mid-air!

Harper looked at it quizzically. He knew his will was still telling the globe to remain where it was, and the globe responded. He thought to himself that he would like the globe to spin as it lay in midair, and before the thought was finished, the globe was spinning!

Then it was describing small circles, then larger ones, then it hopped up and down, falling at times within an inch of the deck only to swoop up almost out of sight. Harper found he could control it with his slightest thought, and he thought up still more complicated maneuvers and the globe responded instantly.

It wasn't until some time later that Harper became aware of a new sensation. He couldn't describe it at first. He thought his feet seemed lighter, a foolish thought. It was like being drunk a little . . .

Then suddenly Harper realized what had happened and he stood there stunned. *He had held the globe in mid-air for longer than a minute!* He had won against the test in his third try! Now he understood the feeling that had come to him, the sickening sensation in his chest, the light-headedness, the ease with which he could breathe again . . . freedom! *It was freedom again!*

He couldn't understand it. Slowly, he turned to face the globe again. It was still hovering, and he remembered that his last command, as it were, to the globe had been for it to remain in mid-air. Evidently whatever strange power he had suddenly acquired still persisted. He held out his hand and the globe leaped into his palm.

He stood there, trying to bring order to his confused brain. He was free—and then he remembered that his freedom also meant the freedom of Lois and Monte and young Van Horn, and in spite of the surge of exultant power he felt, anger burned in him like a flame. He would make certain that his victory remained his alone!

IT was as if his thoughts had conjured them into being—for as Harper started forward, the shadowy figures of the three emerged before him! Before Harper could speak, the aged Lindite had come among them. His face was expressionless, the thin sheets of parchment-like skin barely moving as he spoke. He bowed and said softly:

"You have our congratulations, Mr. Harper. You and your friends are free to go."

Harper looked wildly from one to the other, then took a step back and

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laughed.

"I have no friends!" he cried savagely. "I'm leaving here alone!"

"Cary, listen to me," Monte began. "You—"

"No you don't!" Harper snarled. "You made your choice—all of you!" His furious gaze traveled to each of them. "You, Lois, tried to sell me out without giving me a chance—and you, Monte, forgot that maybe I could win a gamble after all!" He sucked in his breath. "You can stop putting that act on, Lois!" he spat. "Your friend Monte told me where I stood in this. And now—so long!"

The Lindite's frail hand reached out and held Harper.

"No, Mr. Harper," he said, softly. "You do not understand. We made a bargain and you won, and no matter how the bargain was won, it must hold."

"You mean they've got to go free?" Harper cried.

The Lindite shook his head.

"Not unless you so desire it. But you must know what you desire, and ignorance would alter our bargain." A vaguely bitter trace of a smile flitted across the ancient face. "I must ask you to listen to your friend. Then you may choose."

"I've chosen already!"

"Fool!" said the Lindite, bitterly. "Do you think it was you who won your freedom? Do you not yet realize that it was this loyal friend of yours who was the instrument that made your victory possible?"

"No one made it possible!"

But suddenly Harper was quiet, breaking off as he remembered how strangely his complete control of the globe had come. He hadn't been able to fathom it. He felt lost, bewildered again.

"Monte?" he repeated, softly. "Monte?"

"I had to do it this way, Cary. Don't you see I lied to you because it was the only way?"

Monte was beside him then, holding his arm in the old way, speaking quietly, letting the words pour out.

"We used to have a motto, Cary. 'Makes No Difference' we used to say. It was a pretty good description of the way I'd taught you to feel about things, because we had to in the kind of life we knew. That's why I didn't want to see you falling in love. Men like us couldn't let anything matter. It had to be the run of luck, good or bad, and just the two of us to take the bad because we knew how to take it . . ."

A great aching began to well up within Cary Harper as he listened. His eyes rested on the trembling form of the girl. She wasn't listening to Monte . . . her gaze was still vacant and unseeing . . .

"There used to be a Cary Harper I knew, a guy who could play a fortune on the turn of a card or the spin of a wheel. He could laugh when he went broke. They said he was great because he was cold, because he had a stone heart and cold water in his veins—but he was great because he was boss of his destiny and destiny didn't matter!

"But tonight that Cary Harper was gone. I watched him, spying on him, yes, and I saw him playing with a little white globe. He could hold it when he was trying it out, but when he decided it was the test, somehow he couldn't anymore . . . And I've been around, Cary, and I knew what it meant. I realized that for the first time, Cary Harper was playing for stakes that made a difference! He couldn't afford to lose! Instead of the cold, calm gambler, there was just a nervous wreck of a kid—a kid just a few years older than another named Ralph Van Horn . . .

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"So I did the only thing I could. I lied to him, taunted him. I had to make him believe nothing mattered anymore, not the stakes, not his fate or anyone else's . . . so that he could gamble again . . . and win . . . win the stakes that meant more to him than his life if he knew it. . . ."

HARPER had no words. He had been standing, his face buried in his hands, completely overwhelmed, unable to speak. Now he took Lois in his arms and kissed her. She made no move. Her eyes were full on him, and she breathed only his name, as if it were a distant memory.

"There is no time left," came the Lindite's fluting voice. "This ship is about to leave. You must go now."

As Harper looked up, he heard the tread of heavy feet advancing along the deck. Two Jovians were slowly walking toward the group, and between them walked Maxwell Green.

Not a word was spoken until Green had reached the group, then he said slowly, staring at the Lindite with deadly eyes:

"There's been a slight change in plans."

From the other sides of the deck, climbing up the ladders and blocking the exits, came other Jovians, their huge bodies swinging from side to side as they closed in. There was no questioning the meaning of the scene. The Jovians' pale, death's-head faces betrayed their allegiance to Green.

"Honor forbids a change in plans, Mr. Green," the Lindite said, his voice very thin and gentle.

"Honor be damned! I told you it was suicide for me to allow this boy and his sister to disappear under the circumstances . . . but you can't let them go if Harper is going with them. It means curtains for me." Green's face was a dull mask of sullen fury. "And these Jovians understand. They're in the same boat in more ways than one."

"The Jovians matter as little as you do, Mr. Green. Have you forgotten your own very special circumstances? This is perhaps a slower, but assuredly a more certain suicide. You cannot rebel."

As Harper regarded Green, he realized that only violence would decide the issue. He had never seen Green this way. Green's right hand had edged into a pocket where a heavy weight sagged suggestively, and Harper could see the tremor that went through Green's right arm. The man's face was demoniacally distorted and his every move was careful and calculated.

"I haven't forgotten that little talk you gave me about the value of slaves to Lindar," he said, dully. "Maybe, if we got back to Lindar with this cargo, maybe it wouldn't be so bad for us even if you weren't with us." His hand trembled again, as he waited for the Lindite to speak. "All right then," Green whispered. "You died on the way, you understand, and we buried you in space . . ."

In the silence that had enveloped the ship, the Lindite stepped forward, smiling gently.

He died with the smile still on his face. From Green's pocket, a hidden heat gun spat its vicious streak of light into that frail body. Slowly, the little form slumped to the deck, the glittering, age-old eyes open, the long, thin mouth stretched into an eternal, last mockery of a smile . . .

And then Cary Harper struck!

DESPERATION, fury, heartbreak all these and something more were in his first blow, for they alone would have left him easy prey for the deadly weapon in Green's hands, and the wait-

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ing strength that lay in the ready, swinging arms of the huge Jovians. But for an instant after the ancient Lindite died, and while the paralytic magic of his mocking smile still lingered, Harper knew what he had to do. And it was that instant, and the something more—the hope, perhaps, but certainly the calmness, the coldness which had come over him, all that was in his first blow.

For Harper bent his supple body forward and hurled the white globe that still lay in his hand. The globe flashed out like a white streak and cracked solidly against Green's skull.

After that it was like a horrible nightmare, but one in which the dreamer alone was awake. For as Maxwell Green pitched heavily to the deck, falling close to the Lindite, the white globe darted back to Harper's hands, and then, without touching them, fired itself across the space between Harper and the Jovian who had attempted to take out Green's weapon! It cracked against the Jovian's outstretched fingers and broke them, whipped up and hurled itself, like some evil, conscious projectile, against the forhead of the Jovian, spreading the stuff of his brains in a gushing flow to the deck.

"Now don't go asking him any silly questions. Just give him a rifle and put him in the cavalry."

And Harper stood there a moment longer, gaunt, furious, yet with a slight preoccupied frown on his face, his will directing the murderous vengeance of the globe as it dealt out death. Again and again the globe leaped in twisting arcs, smashing down the Jovians before they could attempt to move.

By then, Monte had seized the weapon from the prostrate form of Green, had gripped young Van Horn's arm and pushed him headlong across the deck. Harper swept the girl into his arms, raised her and followed Monte.

And the globe, hovering over the deck, swept back and forth in contracting and expanding circles. All the way to the ship's hangar it spun in blinding, unerring flight, keeping the four within its circumference as free as it had almost enslaved them.

As they entered the ship's hangar, several attendants rushed at them from behind the shelter of the launch. Those who ducked the wrath of the white globe met a single flash from the gun in Monte's steady hand.

After that, the *Venus Sapphire* lay quietly, while a little, unmarked police plane took off from her locks. The plane circled the flickering blue lights of the Lindite ship and started away. Monte pointed to her.

"She's leaving, Cary . . ." The ship was a thin, slow streak of light against the weird, faint haze of dawn. ". . . leaving with those poor souls aboard her, lost forever."

Harper watched the *Venus Sapphire* turning her bow into the void, and great sobs of laughter choked him. He held up his hand, freeing the white globe. After a moment it leaped away, in-

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stantly lost to sight, speeding toward the slowly moving target . . .

They heard the sharp report the white globe made when it tore through the hull of the ship, crashing again and again through the controls, destroying the blasters, smashing the rudders, hurling itself through the bowels of the ghost that had been the *Venus Sapphire.*

The ship had stopped moving. It lay in the morning sky above Tyuio, helpless prisoner in space, unable to move . . .

The tears that had fallen from Cary Harper to the lovely face of the girl who lay in his arms opened her eyes. He kissed her, and somehow, he knew everything was going to be all right.*

*. . . and at least half the success of these experiments was due to the miraculous saving of these doomed people from the *Venus Sapphire.* These prisoners of the Lindites, never having been to Lindar, still sound in health, were experimented upon for months, and every one was finally cured. Today, scarcely a hospital in the System is without serum to counteract the effects of the Lindite Drink of Honor.

But the essence of the Lindite strength lay not in their drug, but in their diabolically clever analysis of human frailty. Not content with building a system that rested on human weakness, they went further and put the key to their success in the same method. For they realized that humans, knowing they faced the Ultimate Gamble, would invariably be shattered against the nerve-breaking walls of this test. Where could will or reason operate when the mind was filled only with fear . . .

. . . on the other hand, though the Lindites have since had their activities drastically reduced, little is known about them still. A Lindite corpse found on the *Venus Sapphire* was too decomposed to offer a good subject for autopsy. Another subject, a renegade I. P. Lieutenant Maxwell Green, confessed aid to the Lindites, offered his body to scientific research upon his death. Unfortunately, shortly before the expiration of the limit of his "tolerance" to ex-Lindite atmosphere, he escaped from jail, and is now presumably either alive on Lindar, or dead elsewhere.

It is certain that the marauding of the Lindites is now almost at an end, and within the next few years, due to these new discoveries . . . etc., etc. —Ed.

(Continued from page 69

breath and waited, watching the exhausts come through the darkness.

And then suddenly there was no more darkness. A light as bright as the noon sun flared. Ben let out a shout, for beyond the light were lined the battle cruisers of Earth. His pursuers turned tail and ran.

"Where the devil did those ships come from?" Davies gasped.

"I sent for them," Ben told him. "We had it all arranged. When I tackled that double I managed to slip a microfilm capsule into his pocket. It had a complete picture of my radona chart. As soon as the double reached Earth, Intelligence grabbed him. All they had to do was follow my chart to Teris."

They were passing the flagship of the Earth fleet, and Ben dipped the nose of his ship in salute. Then he turned to see what was going on.

There was going to be no attempt to invade Teris. Instead, its surface was illuminated with more of the flares. A moment later Teris was gone, blasted by the guns of a thousand cruisers. And for the strange women who would have enslaved a universe, Ben felt no pity.

THE END

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It's frustrating. After working all day to fix up the peony bed, this meteor tears right into it. A strange kind of meteor too—with a message in it!

THE EXPLOSION came at night; nothing terrific, and no great concussion. Just a quick bright flash outside the Evans bedroom window.

Sam and Marie Evans were asleep when the object—whatever it was—struck the earth. The flash brightened the window and the house shook a trifle. But it was over so quickly, they couldn't be sure. Sam awoke with a white cloud in front of his eyes.

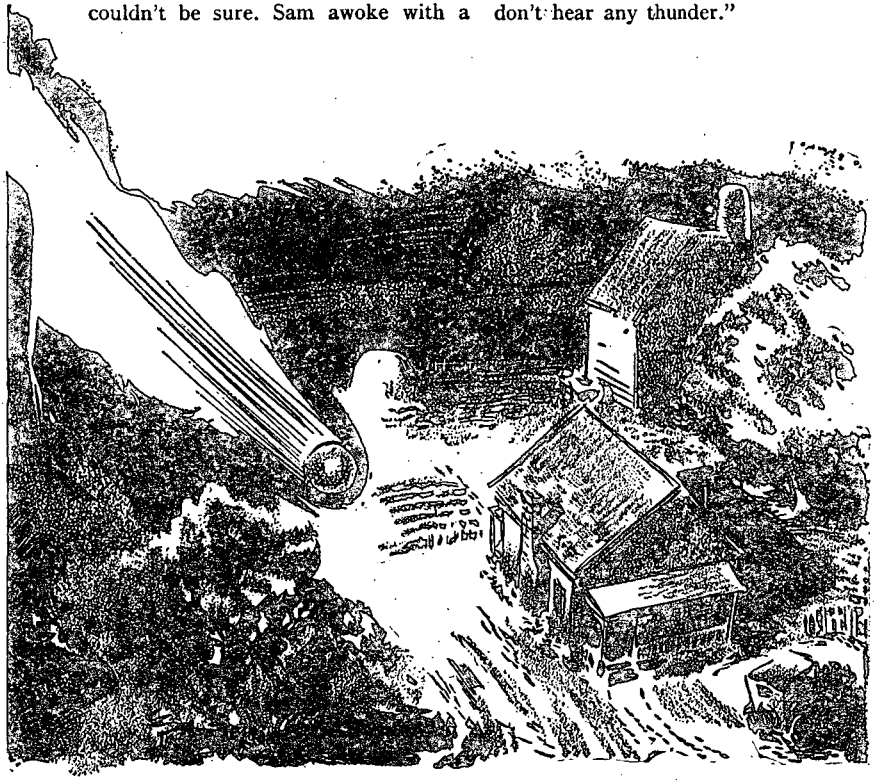
"Marie—Marie. Did you feel—see that?"

"What, Sam?"

"I don't know. Maybe a storm's coming up."

"The sky was clear when we went to bed. Get up and shut the window, will you, darling?"

"It's hot. Maybe I was mistaken. I don't hear any thunder."



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"Then go back to sleep. I want you to weed the garden in the morning."

"I was going fishing."

"Yes dear. That's right. Weed the garden."

The next morning nothing was said about the midnight awakening. There was no need for comment as the storm had not broken and the day was bright and sunny.

But around ten o'clock, Sam found a four-foot indentation in the peony bed while he was walking toward the garden. He called his wife. She came to stare in horror.

"Sam! What on earth have you done?"

"Me? I didn't do it."

"Then what—how? Oh, my beautiful flowers—ruined! It's those dogs again."

Sam scratched his head. "I don't think so, Marie. Dogs aren't so neat and tidy. They don't dig a cone-shaped hole four feet in diameter. Besides, there aren't any tracks."

Marie grasped his arm. She was uneasy—almost frightened. "Then what could it have been, Sam? What sort of an animal did it?"

"I don't think it was an animal. Remember that flash I saw last night?"

"A bolt of lightning did—this? I never heard of lightning knocking a hole in the bare ground."

"Neither did I. You know Marie—I wonder. I just wonder. Do you think something could have fallen from somewhere?" He brightened with excitement. "Maybe a meteor, Marie. The things that fall out of the sky."

His wife was doubtful. "I've heard they're great big things. They tear a hole miles wide. I read about one once in the wilds of northern Russia...."

POSSIBLY SAM was sincere, or perhaps he struck on the idea to get out of the weeding job. Anyhow, he waxed enthusiastic. "Tell you who'd be interested in this, Marie. That astronomy professor—that Mr. Fuzzy or Fazzy or something. He's got a cottage on Ben's place across the lake. Now, I'll just row over and get him—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Sam Evans."

"Why not, honey? After all—"

"Who's land is this, anyhow?"

"Why ours, of course—except for the mortgage."

"Then if that's a meteor, who does it belong to?"

"Us, I guess."

"Then why are you talking about calling somebody else in? It was the same way when that pretty collie dog came to stay with us. You had to traipse off and keep hunting until you found somebody that knew somebody who lost—"

"Okay, honey. Okay. But what are we going to do? Just stand here and look at the hole?"

"Of course not, stupid. You're going to get a shovel and see what you can find."

It was better than weeding the garden because there was a certain air of novelty to it—a definite sense of the mysterious. Sam got a shovel and started to dig.

He uncovered nothing. Nothing but the rich, dark earth that makes peas as big as marbles and corn on foot-long ears. Sam went down two feet and began to tire. He rested while Marie brought him a glass of water. He started anew and went down another two feet. He stopped and mopped his brow.

"Guess it's a wild-goose chase, honey. There's nothing here nohow. Maybe a dog did make this hole."

"Now, don't be lazy, Sam. You go ahead and dig."

"Well—another foot maybe."

Another foot uncovered nothing.

"One more spadeful, Sam, before

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you quit. They say it happens that way sometimes on treasure hunts. I read it in Tom Sawyer, how once—"

Marie stopped talking. Sam had turned another shovelful and another. The second time he brought up a small round object that rolled off his shovel and half buried itself in the soft soil.

"What's that, Sam? What's that?"

"Looks like a rock. Gimme time to pick it up."

"It's too smooth and round for a rock, Sam."

HE HAD picked it up and cleaned it off. "Hmmm. The thing's warm. He held the sphere forth in his hand, squinting at it with calculation. It's metal of some sort—and kind of warm. Looks for all the world like a lump of grapeshot. You suppose some joker fired an old cannon at us last night?"

"Sam, you're daffy. Who ever saw a perfectly round chunk of grapeshot the size of a cantaloupe? Give it to me."

Sam handed the object to his wife who promptly dropped it on his foot. He danced around on the other foot while she picked it up again.

"Why didn't you tell me it was heavy?"

"You didn't give me a chance. Why can't you be more careful?"

"You'll live, Sam Evans." Marie carried the ball to the house and laid it on the stone walk.

Sam hobbled after her and watched as she cleaned it with her apron until it gave off a dull luster. "Looks like it was made from an old aluminum pot," Sam said. "Hadn't I better go get that astronomer fellow now? He'll know more about it than we do."

"Sam Evans! Stop being such a fool! It's our meteor. Why should we call some college man in who might figure a way to cheat us out of it? Besides, this don't look like any meteor to me. I do believe it comes apart some way. Get a screw driver and a hammer and the axe, Sam. Guess we got enough sense to open our own property."

"Maybe we have at that, honey."

Sam went to the tool shed and got the equipment and came back and went to work. He began by tapping it lightly with a hammer.

He finished, half an hour later, by slugging it whole-heartedly with the axe. The material of the ball was surprisingly tough. It took the axe blows with scarcely a nick and refused to open. Sam wiped his brow. "We could try roasting it open on a fire."

"You think of the silliest things."

"Why silly? Nuts pop open on a hot fire. Maybe this is some kind of a nut."

"If it came through space, it got red hot from the atmosphere. I read that in a book about meteors."

Sam looked up at the bright sky. "I've heard tell it's pretty cold up there. Not hot at all."

"That's got nothing to do with it. Nothing at—Sam! Look!"

MARIE HAD picked up the ball and had given it an energetic twist. It came apart in her hands.

"The pounding must have loosened it. Let me see. What's inside?"

Disappointment was mirrored in Marie's face. "Not a thing. Not a single, solitary thing except a piece of paper."

"Well, a piece of paper's something. Let me see."

The paper was folded twice. Opened, it was revealed to be about five inches square and was of very heavy, almost metallic paper. It was covered with spidery markings in black ink.

Marie held the paper forth, and together they studied the markings.

"Don't make no sense to me," Sam said. "Looks like some youngster was marking with a little paint brush."

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Marie sighed. "All that work for nothing."

Sam was slightly ruffled. "Well, I didn't see you doing none of it."

"All wasted," Marie went on as though he hadn't spoken. "Seems like we never have no luck, Sam."

He softened and put an arm about her shoulders. "Don't you fret none, honey. We've got our home and it's almost paid for. We've got each other."

"And our garden."

Sam took his arm away. "Oh, sure. The garden. Honey, why don't I take this thing over to that Mr. Fuzzy? He might be interested even though it's just a paper."

"His name is Fusari. But remember—you aren't getting out of anything. You'll weed the garden tomorrow."

"Of course, honey. I'd do it today, but this is pretty important."

PROFESSOR JOHN FUSARI listened to Sam's story, first with polite interest and then with interest that was far more than polite. He studied the two halves of the hollow ball, examined the paper, peered at the writing.

"Mr. Evans," he said finally, "I wonder if you'd let me take these down to the city with me tomorrow. I'm not qualified to pass an opinion as to whether they came from outer space or not. But I know a man—a friend of mine—Professor Holman at the university, who is an expert on languages. If this is writing, he will know it. If any man on earth can translate it, Holman can. He's been doing a lot of work recently on Egyptian and *Sanskrit*."

"Is that so?" Sam said. "Well, now, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't take these trinkets with you. They sure aren't any good to me."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

Sam went home wondering what *Sanskrit* was.

Marie saw to it that he got at the weeds the following day. That gave him an excuse to go fishing on Wednesday. Thursday it rained, and on Friday Marie asked, "Sam, whatever happened to our meteor? Didn't that professor person say he'd call you up if he heard anything?"

"Guess he must not have heard anything," Sam said mildly.

As if by prearrangement, the phone rang at that precise moment. Sam answered. He listened a while and then hung up. "Got to bustle over to the professor's," he said importantly. "That other professor's coming up to the country to see this professor of ours, and our professor says for me to come over."

"Sam—how many professors are mixed up in this thing? I thought you said—"

"Never mind. I'll probably have a lot more to say when I get back." He went down and got into the boat and rowed across to Professor Fusari's place.

PROFESSOR HOLMAN arrived a little later. He was a benign-looking man with a halo of white hair around the rim of an otherwise bald head. He had Sam's mysterious piece of letter paper with him.

They sat on the porch and drank beer out of the cans and Holman answered Fusari's first question by saying, "Yes, I managed it. That is, basically. In some ways the language was most difficult—in others, very easy. I got the gist of it without any trouble."

"Do you think the document came from outer space?"

"Oh—I'm sure of it. Of course, others will have to come to prove me right, but I'm sure it came from space."

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"From Mars?"

"Probably."

"Then you learned something of the Martians?"

"Well—no."

"Too bad."

"Not directly, that is. Indirectly, I think I learned a great deal."

"Tell us."

"I discovered beyond doubt what the document was, and from that I could deduce a picture. Scientifically, of course, they are ahead of us. Politically, they are backward. The note was obviously from a powerful man—a king or an emperor—who has all science at his command."

"Interesting," Fusari said.

Sam said nothing. He drank his beer and listened.

"Yet, this emperor," Holman went went on, "is a man pretty much like ourselves. He has the same emotions—the same personal pride. This is how the picture is in my mind: a great monarch on Mars, extremely happy over an event of great importance to himself and possibly to all Mars. In at least one way, a most arrogant monarch, because he wanted the whole universe to know of this event, and used Martian science to acquaint them with it. He probably fired a great many of those balls into space."

Sam was getting bored, but he was too polite to get up and walk away. So he sat and listened until Professor Holman finished. Finally he rowed the boat back across the lake.

"What did you find out, Sam?" Marie asked.

Sam was in a low mood. Possibly because the meteor thing hadn't panned out so well. He sighed. "You know, Marie, you're right. We don't have much luck at all somehow. We never get out much. Nobody ever invites us nowhere."

"What's that got to do with the meteor?"

"Like I was saying. Just our luck. We finally get invited to a big affair—a nice shindig—and it's being held on some other planet we can't get to."

"Sam Evans! What are you talking about?"

"I'm telling you! That's what the meteor was. Some Martian king invited us to his daughter's wedding."

THE END

CLOTHES SAVE THE MAN

By Frederic Booth

IN THE OLDEN DAYS, when a warrior wanted to safeguard his life in battle, he was forced to wear an extremely heavy armor made of steel which so encumbered his movement that its advantages were doubtful.

Now the Army has reported the development of a new plastic armor which is said to be capable of stopping a .45 bullet at pointblank range. These lightweight protective helmets and jackets are going to be given tests under battle conditions in Korea. They are to be tried out by litter bearers who now work without any kind of protection.

Field tests will be conducted later for armoured seats to be used in liaison airplanes and for eye armor to be used by men clearing mines.

It is hoped that shell fragments, as well as small-arms fire which is almost spent, will bounce off the new armor. Little protection is expected against such types of high-velocity missiles as rifle or machine-gun fire.

One of the jacket models is made of cotton fitted with stiff panels of glass fiber and plastic about an eighth of an inch thick. Several layers of nylon pressed together make up another type of jacket.

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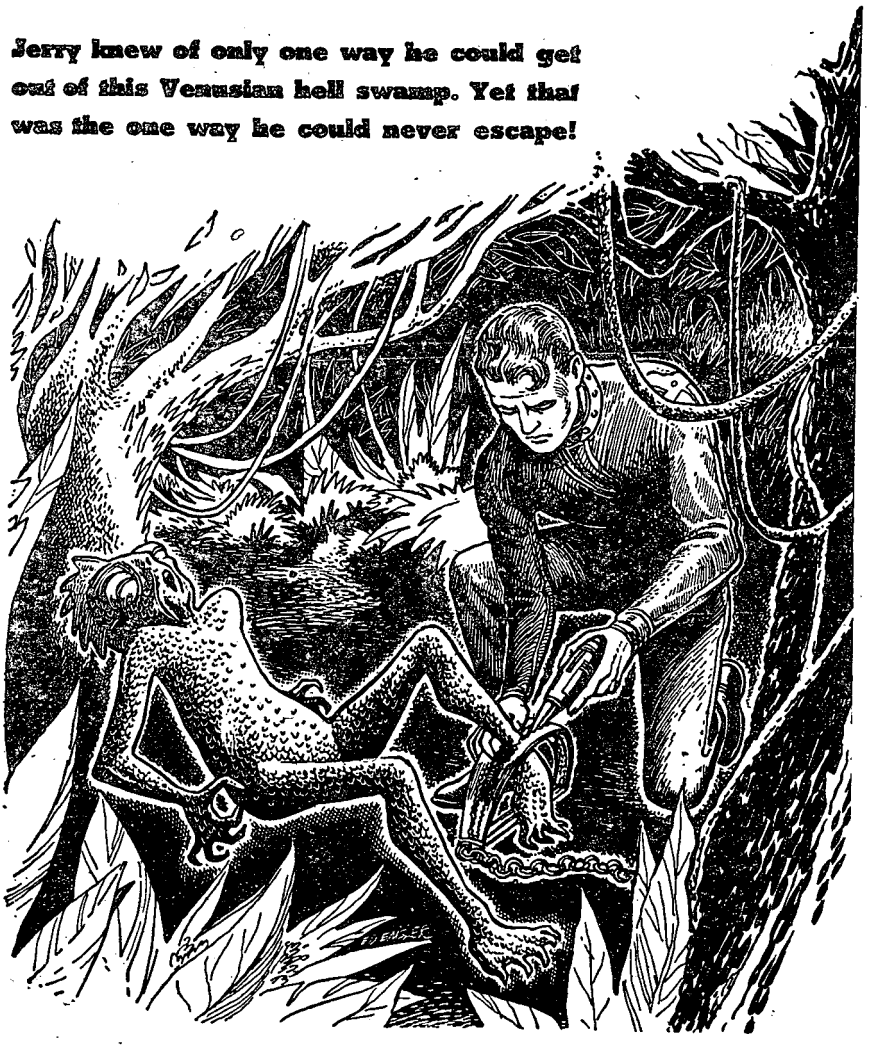
WHO FLEE THEIR CHAINS

By Guy Archette

Jerry knew of only one way he could get out of this Venusian hell swamp. Yet that was the one way he could never escape!



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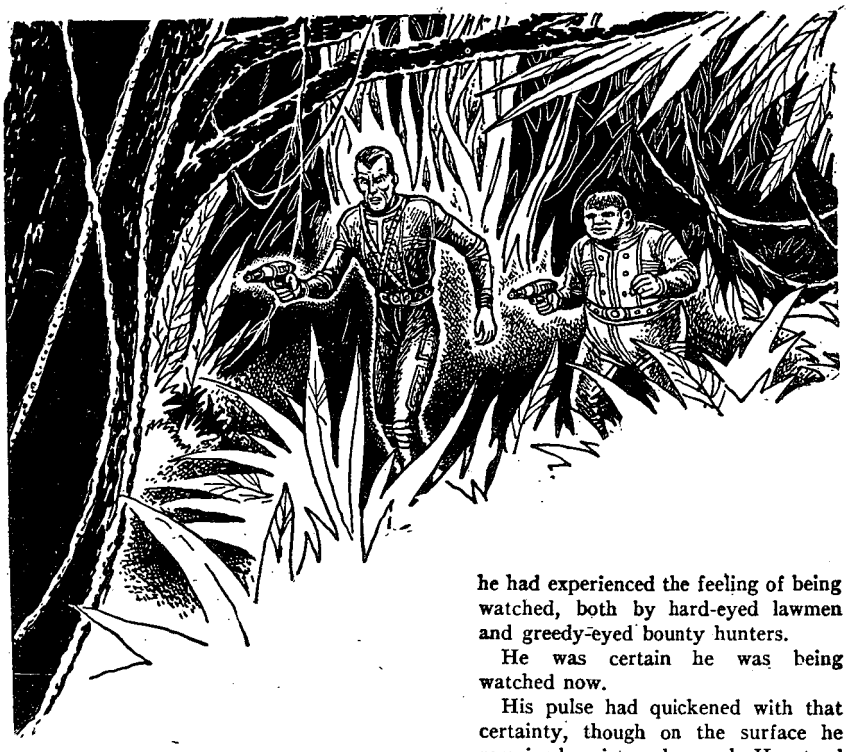

HE HAD the sensation of being watched.

It was a sensation known to men in lonely places; and this sparsely settled plateau country in North Gondwanaland, on Venus, was lonelier than most. The very loneliness of their surroundings gives these men a heightened sensitivity to the presence of others, human or animal.

Jerry Gill's sensitivity was especially heightened. As a contract laborer on a huge, corporation-owned *kwaali* plantation, he had learned what it was like to be watched—watched constantly by sharp-eyed overseers, with their ever-present, ever-ready shock-sticks. And as a contract-buster—a fugitive—he had experienced the feeling of being watched, both by hard-eyed lawmen and greedy-eyed bounty hunters.

He was certain he was being watched now.

His pulse had quickened with that certainty, though on the surface he remained quiet and casual. He stood peering through the fine rain that fell almost continuously in this part of Venus, a slim, sandy-haired figure in a glistening, transparent drizzle-suit. His face, beneath the suit's hood, was the face of a boy who had become a man too soon, its frankness and humor overlaid with the marks of toil and care. One hand, inserted through a slit in the suit, rested on the butt of the mach-pistol holstered at his side.

He ran his eyes over the dense forest wall that towered abruptly beyond the poison trench at the edge of his *kwaali* field. He could see nothing amid the maze of huge greenish-gray leaves and tree trunks, but he knew anything might be concealed there.

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Anything from a tiger-lizard to a Scalie, one of the race of Venusian natives inhabiting this region.

He thought suddenly of Hazel, alone at the cabin, and he turned with an inner lurch of anxiety to peer toward the farm building up the slope behind him. The cabin stood on concrete supports, well above the muddy ground, and he could see the outline of those of its windows that faced toward him.

Perhaps it was only Hazel watching; but he dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. There was a gentleness and trust in Hazel's gaze that he did not feel now. What he sensed held a different quality: slyness, threat.

He turned for a last wary glance at the forest. And stiffened in startled surprise.

TWO FIGURES in drizzle-suits were leaping the poison trench, hurrying toward him through the *kwaali* plants.

Through the gray curtain of rain, Gill saw they were white men, armed with rifles and carrying light packs. Evidently aware they had been seen, the men lifted their hands, palms outward, and called out the universal greeting of Venus: *"Kaa-hai!"*

Gill loosened his mach-pistol in its holster before he lifted his own hand. If these men were dangerous, at least they seemed to intend no immediate harm. A show of friendliness would help to establish peaceful relations.

Yet he remained uneasy. A contract-buster was always uneasy. Discovery and capture meant being sentenced to a convict labor gang for a term of five years—in addition to the years remaining unserved under the broken contract. In Gill's case this amounted to a total of somewhat more than eight years.

Eight years of virtual slavery. Eight years of being watched and driven, of being underfed and overworked.

Few lived through even five such years, what with the ravages of the Venusian climate and Venusian diseases.

There was an out. Freedom could be purchased. But the price was most often beyond the reach of persons like small-scale *kwaali* farmers.

It was a simple economic fact that Gill knew only too well. He had spent countless sleepless hours figuring what it would cost to buy his freedom and pay his and Hazel's passage to Earth. And lately his figuring had been done with increasing desperation. Only last week the doctor from the settlement had warned him that Hazel's life depended on her leaving Venus as soon as possible. Her attacks of blue fever were becoming too frequent and too severe. He could have managed to send her alone, but she wouldn't go without him.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as the two men approached. They were an ill-matched pair, rough and slovenly in appearance. One was lean and wolfish in build, the other heavy and squat. Studying them as they came nearer, Gill was suddenly struck by an impression of familiarity.

All at once he had a cold, sick feeling.

The two men had recognized him also. He heard their surprised exclamations.

"Howling hell, Sam, just look who we've run into!" the wolfish one said.

"It's Gill! Old Jerry Gill himself, alive and kicking! Well, cut my blast, Duff!" This from the squat one.

"Kaa-hai!" Gill retorted with pretended affability. "What are you two doing in this neck of the woods?"

THE LAST time he had seen Duff Malloy and Sam Harper, they had been contract laborers in his platoon.

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Since their contracts had still a few years to run, it was evident that they had skipped out, become outlaws as he himself had done.

Gill knew Sam Harper would give him no reason for worry. The squat man had little intelligence and even less courage. He was the type that enjoyed taking orders, since that solved the problem of existence in a complex world.

Duff Malloy, however, was a different proposition. His nature was as wolfish as his appearance, combining a quick, crafty mind with a complete lack of honor or scruple. He never overlooked an opportunity for personal gain. As a contract laborer, he had organized half a dozen lucrative rackets, including a traffic in forbidden Venusian narcotics. And he had been suspected of at least one killing at the plantation, though his guilt had never been proved.

Malloy was the last person in the world Gill would have wanted to know of his background and whereabouts. With his ruthless instincts, the man would not hesitate to use the knowledge as a weapon.

"Our flitter ran out of fuel back there," Malloy said, gesturing toward the forest. "Me and Sam saw your place as we passed over, and so we hiked back. Never thought we'd run into you here, Gill."

"I'm surprised you boys are jetting around loose," Gill said. "You must have jumped your contracts."

Harper said, "We got fed up with the way that *kwaali* outfit was treating us, and we—"

"Shut up, Sam!" Malloy said sharply.

The squat man looked resentful, but shrugged carelessly. Fear moved like a shadow over his heavy face under the fierce impact of Malloy's pale eyes.

To Gill, Malloy said, "Me and Sam are free as the wind. We bought up our contracts."

Gill's smile was twisted. "I know better than that. If you had bought up your contracts, you wouldn't have bothered to watch me from the forest the way you did. Only a couple of contract-busters would want to make sure I wasn't the law, or that there wasn't any law around. Besides, Sam let the cat out of the bag."

MALLOY SCOWLED. "Well, I guess you ought to know, Gill. You ain't going to tell me you bought up your contract."

"Maybe I did."

"The hell you did. Where'd you dig up that kind of fancy money?" Malloy's narrow face wrinkled in a sudden, conspiratorial grin. "Let's stop trying to fool each other, Gill. We know where we stand." He gestured toward the *kwaali* field. "How you making out?"

"How does any small *kwaali* farmer make out against the big corporation plantations?" Gill demanded bitterly.

"Well, me and Sam ain't been doing so bad," Malloy said. "We managed to pick up a nice piece of change here and there. Odd jobs, sort of. Right now we're working on something that's going to put a big hunk of cash in our pockets. Ever hear of bio-pearls, Gill?"

"I've heard of them. They're supposed to be very rare, worth a lot of money."

"I'll say they're worth a lot of money!" Malloy's pale eyes glittered with avarice. "That's because only about a dozen have ever been found. The last one brought in sold for—how much do you think it sold for, Gill? How much do you think?"

"Ten thousand?" Gill hazarded. "Twenty thousand?"

"Thirty-five thousand!" Malloy said. "And it wasn't such a good one.

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either. Think how much a good one would sell for. Think how much a handful would sell for!"

Gill shrugged. "The things are too rare. Where would anybody find a handful?"

Malloy smiled thinly. "I got an idea about that. Nothing I'm going to give away for free, understand. But here's something to chew on. Bio-pearls grow, see? That's why they're called bio-pearls. And they grow only in a few places. Something special in the soil, I guess. Nobody knows where to find those places. But I do."

Excitement kindled in Gill. "You mean you know what kind of soil to look for?"

MALLOY'S expression became mocking. "That would be telling. And I ain't telling." He peered through the fine rain at the farm buildings up the slope. "Nice little place you got here, Gill. Me and Sam are in luck, all right."

"Yeah," Harper put in. He shuddered slightly and gestured toward the forest. "We thought we'd have to camp out there, and me, I wasn't too keen about the idea."

Gill said slowly, "What was it you came here for, Malloy? You said your flitter ran out of fuel. I can let you have some."

Malloy waved a hand. "No hurry about that, Gill. No hurry at all. Let's go up to the house and get inside where it's dry."

Gill remained motionless. "We'd better understand each other, Malloy. I can let you have some fuel and just about anything else you might need. But I stop there."

The other's pale eyes narrowed. "What the hell, Gill, you ain't cold-shouldering me and Sam, are you?"

"You can put it that way if you want to," Gill returned. "I've got a sick wife in the cabin. She has blue fever, and she has to have it quiet. You know what blue fever cases are like."

"A wife, eh?" Malloy glanced shyly at Harper. "Well, ain't that cozy! All right, Gill, you want us to be quiet, we'll be quiet."

"Not once you two start hitting the bottle. I know your habits." Gill shook his head doggedly. His breathing had quickened. "I'll give you the fuel, Malloy. Anything else. But that's as far as I go."

The wolfish man's face became ugly with anger. "Figure your wife's too good for us, eh?"

"Not too good. Too sick."

"Maybe she doesn't know you're nothing but a contract-buster. Maybe you don't want her to find out."

"She knows."

"Then maybe you figure you're too good to associate with us any more," Malloy said furiously. "Well, if that ain't the limit! I never thought I'd live to see the day when one contract man would cold-shoulder another. Hell, Gill, we were in the same platoon together. We slept in the same bunkhouse, ate at the same mess table."

"So did a lot of other men," Gill said. "That doesn't put either of us under any obligation to the other. You never did any favors for me, Malloy. In fact, you weren't even friendly toward me."

"I could do you a favor now—by not telling some lawman where to find you. Think about that, Gill. You wouldn't like to be sentenced to a convict labor gang, would you?"

GILL SHRUGGED leadenly. "If I have to choose between a labor gang and my wife dying, I'll take the labor gang."

Malloy's mouth curled and he made a sudden movement to shift the position of his rifle. "Well, by God, if I have to—"

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"Hold it, Malloy!" Gill's hand had remained close to the mach-pistol at his side. Now he drew it in a flash of motion. "I was hoping I wouldn't have any trouble with you two, but if trouble is what you want, I'll see that you get it. I could kill you both and bury you out in the forest. Nobody would ever find you."

"Wait a minute, Gill!" Malloy said anxiously. "Now, don't start blasting your jets. I was only kidding."

"Sure, Jerry," Harper put in, fright shining in his small eyes. "You know we wouldn't do anything mean."

"I'm going to make certain of that," Gill said. "Put the rifle down, Malloy. You too, Harper. Then get your hands up, both of you, and step back."

The two men thrust their rifles into the mud and moved away from them. Circling carefully behind the pair, Gill took the weapons remaining in their holsters. He removed the shell clips from the collection and with these strode a short distance up the slope.

"All right, there are your guns. Take them and clear out."

"But what about the fuel, Gill?" Malloy asked quickly.

"You had your chance at it—until you talked about tipping off the law. I'd be a fool to put you in a position to use your flitter and do just that."

Malloy said desperately, "I was just kidding, Gill. You know I wouldn't turn you in. If you'll let me have the fuel, I promise—"

"No fuel. And don't try getting it at the settlement, either. I'm going to see that the right people are warned to watch for a couple of contract-busters."

"Hell, Gill, you're making it tough for us," Malloy protested.

"No tougher than you'd have made it for me, if you'd got the chance. All I want is to keep you two out of mischief for a while. Now, take your guns and clear out."

Malloy's narrow face knotted with abrupt fury. "I'm going to remember this, Gill." He jerked his head at Harper. The two retrieved their weapons, and then, with a last baleful glance at Gill, Malloy led the way back across the *kwaali* field.

GILL TURNED and strode through the rain and the clinging mud underfoot, to the cabin. He knew he'd be in danger once Malloy and Harper gained the shelter of the forest and reloaded their weapons. Luckily, the cabin walls were strong enough to withstand a spraying.

Before rounding an angle of the cabin, he peered back toward the forest. He saw the small, rain-blurred shapes of Malloy and Harper as they entered the tangle of gray-green foliage and became lost to view. He waited for long minutes, his muscles bunched with tension, but no bursts of firing came from the spot where the pair had vanished.

Malloy evidently had some more subtle means of revenge in mind.

Gill strode up the cabin steps and entered the sani-spray stall. He waited while the disinfectant shower washed the mud from his boots, together with the bacteria, spores and other tiny but voracious and prolific Venusian life that had collected on them, and in the folds of his drizzle-suit. Finally, turning off the spray, he removed his outer garments and entered the cabin.

He found Hazel seated on the edge of her bed, her small, pale face drawn with anxiety.

"Jerry!" she said. "Those men—I saw what happened. Who were they? What was the matter?"

"You're supposed to stay in bed," he said accusingly.

"I'm tired of staying in bed, Jerry—tired of being so helpless, such a

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burden. I wondered what you were doing, and when I looked out of the window I saw the men you were talking to. It looked like they were up to trouble of some sort."

"Nothing serious," he lied. "Just a couple of tramps. They had an idea of making themselves at home here, but they weren't the kind of men I'd trust under the same roof with me. I ran them off."

HE KNEW the explanation sounded too pat, and he looked away from the doubt in Hazel's dark eyes. She knew about his past—he wouldn't have had it otherwise—but he didn't want her to know that a very real and active threat had risen from it. Her health depended on quiet, and complete freedom from worry and fear.

She said slowly, "Are you sure there wasn't more to it, Jerry? I keep thinking that sometime someone's going to recognize you, someone who knows what you once were."

He shrugged casually as he busied himself before the stove. "Not very likely out here."

"It could happen anywhere, Jerry. I couldn't stand having you dragged away to the kind of slavery they allow on Venus. It's a rotten system."

"But a necessary one," he said. "It was the only thing that would meet conditions here. Men are needed to work and develop the planet, a lot of men. And the only way to get them to Venus is to sign them up as labor recruits. Most of them don't have the kind of money it takes to pay their passage. The big corporations do, but before they spend it they've got to be sure they'll get full value in return. They can't have men slip through their fingers to take easier jobs or better-paying jobs with rival corporations. That means contracts and laws against breaking them.

"It isn't a bad system. After the usual five years of service, a man has his freedom and money paid for good behavior and work done above quotas. He has practically the whole planet to pick from. The opportunities for getting rich are almost endless."

"Except for contract-busters." Hazel shook her dark head, her expression wistful. "If it's such a good system, Jerry, what about those awful scars on your back?"

He shrugged. "It's a good system—for the most part. Any system has a few of the wrong kind of men in it, and I happened to be unlucky enough to draw them. Men who take advantage of things to make a bigger profit than they otherwise could. In my case, everyone from the big brass down to the overseers seemed to have the idea they were running a slave labor camp instead of a business."

THE GIRL was silent a moment, staring down at her clasped hands. She said abruptly, "Isn't there any hope for you, Jerry? Any hope that you won't have to hide any more—that you can go wherever you please, without being afraid that someone—?"

"Maybe there is," he said suddenly, his tone musing. He sat down on the bed beside her, his hands on her shoulders. "Maybe there is," he said again. "And if there is, honey, would you help me?"

"Of course," she said at once. "But what could I do?"

"I want you to stay at the settlement, where I know you'll be in good hands. That will give me the chance to make a little trip and sort of work on an idea I have."

She studied him anxiously. "Jerry, this trip—does it have anything to do with the men who were here?"

"In a way, yes. You see, honey, those men had the idea they could find bio-pearls around here somewhere."

"Bio-pearls! But, Jerry, why here?"

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"I don't know exactly. They weren't giving away that information. But I think I have it figured out. Some of the bio-pearls brought in were obtained by trading with the Scalies. I think all the bio-pearls were found that way, but most men didn't want to admit it, maybe to keep away competition. And there's a Scalie village in the forest, not very far from here. I'll bet almost anything that's where those two tramps are headed."

Gill's eyes gleamed. "They said something about bio-pearls growing only in a special kind of soil. I figure they expect to find that kind of soil somewhere in this region, through the Scalies. The Scalies would know, because bio-pearls have been obtained through them. And if I could trade for one, beat the other two men to it—"

She clutched at him. "It would mean freedom for you, Jerry! Freedom!"

"And Earth for you," he said. "Will you do it—stay at the settlement for a while?"

"Yes, Jerry. But you'll be careful, won't you? For some reason, those two men worry me."

"I'll be careful all right, don't worry about that. We'll leave here as soon as we can get you ready."

He felt a deep relief. His plan had accomplished its first and most important objective, which was to get Hazel away from the cabin and out of danger.

THE FOREST was dank and gloomy, a bizarrely patterned labyrinth that led on and on through depth after riotously luxuriant depth. Gill moved slowly through the choked, narrow lanes among the vegetation, swinging his machete at the vines and branches that blocked his path. With the mach-pistol gripped in his other hand, he probed warily at the thick shadows that lay everywhere among the huge dripping leaves, his ears alert for any change in the heavy, alien silence that lay around him.

Three days, Earth-time, had passed since he had flown Hazel to the settlement. Returning to the farm, he had taken the precaution of leaving his flitter in a spot where it was not likely to be discovered by anyone else. His entire supply of fuel had been put aboard the craft and left there for safekeeping. This stratagem, he hoped, would keep Malloy and Harper localized until he had time to carry out his plans.

He knew nothing of the whereabouts of the two, though on his first day in the forest he had run across a spot where they had made camp. He had followed their trail for a while, then had lost them. But he felt he had an advantage over Malloy and Harper; he was familiar with this region, having flown over it numerous times in his flitter. He knew both the exact location of the Scalie village and the quickest route for reaching it.

The Scalie tribe here, however, was pretty much an unknown quantity. The natives kept to themselves and seemed to ignore attempts at friendship. Those few he saw near the farm occasionally always faded back into the forest at his approach. The Scalies were not dangerous as a rule, but there were instances of attacks on Earthmen by the more primitive types. Gill had only a vague idea about how he was going to deal with those he intended to visit—he didn't know at all what Malloy and Harper intended to do.

CHOPPING his way through a dense tangle of undergrowth, Gill suddenly found himself on the bank of a broad, swift-flowing stream. This, he knew, had its source in the mountains; and from here it continued for some dozen miles more before descending, in a series of waterfalls, to the night-marish jungle-choked lowland valleys.

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The lowlands, ventured into by only a few intrepid explorers, were uninhabitable by Earthmen and, to a large extent, even by Venusians.

The Scalie village was now a mile or two downstream, and after resting a moment Gill struck off along the bank. He moved with even greater caution. It was possible that Malloy and Harper were somewhere nearby. With a head start on him, the two might have stumbled across the stream by this time, in which case they would know that the Scalies were not too far away.

Gill moved with difficulty through the heavy growth along the bank, skirting enormous trees that arched out over the water. Huge insects with shining, rainbow-hued wings fluttered over the swift, oil-smooth flow of the stream, and brightly colored bird-like shapes darted through the branches overhead.

Once Gill came to a relatively clear space where something large and sleek crouched at the edge of the stream. It was a tiger-lizard, its powerful form and striped, scaly hide making the reason for its name immediately evident. For an instant the creature stared at Gill with its lambent, slanted eyes, then whirled with a snarl and vanished amid the undergrowth.

Gill lowered his mach-pistol with a sigh of relief and continued on. He had not gone far, when the heavy quiet was broken by a sudden high-pitched cry—a sound that might have been made by a child in pain.

He froze, listening intently. An interval of hushed silence, and then he heard a shrill whimpering. It came from somewhere close at hand. A Scalie, in serious trouble of some sort.

Thoughts racing, Gill followed the direction of the sounds. They took him a short distance further along the bank of the stream. He reached a gap in the undergrowth and here, huddled on the ground, he saw the sinuously slim, diminutive shape of a Scalie.

AT FIRST glance the native might have been mistaken for a child of Earth. Then one saw the glistening, scaly skin and the hairless head with its erect spiny crest, the inhuman little face with its tiny mouth and huge, luminous green eyes.

The Scalie stared at Gill for a moment, then attempted to dart away. But it stopped short, sprawling at full length with a thin moan of agony.

Abruptly, Gill saw why the native had been unable to flee. Something was fastened about one of its limbs, something curved and metallically gleaming. A trap, connected to a length of chain.

The trap meant Earthmen, Gill realized—most likely Malloy and Harper. But had the two deliberately set out to trap a Scalie, or had the native only been caught by accident?

Then Gill saw it had been no accident, for as he slowly moved forward his eyes were drawn by a bright glitter a few feet away, almost at face level. A gaudy bead necklace hung from a branch, over what evidently had been the original position of the trap. The piece of cheap jewelry had without question been set out as bait for a Scalie. And one had been caught.

Gill swore under his breath as swift anger surged through him. It had been a rotten thing to do. That trap had been set out with a callous disregard for the suffering it would cause.

Fear shone in the native's eyes as it watched Gill move closer. Venusians were highly intelligent, Gill knew, and apparently this one connected him with the trap. He spoke softly, in reassurance.

"Friend," he said. It was a word understood by most natives. "I'm a friend, old fellow. Understand? Easy

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now. I'm not going to hurt you. All I'm going to do is get this trap open."

The Scalie had started struggling again, but now it ceased its futile efforts and watched Gill puzzledly. Unlimbering his pack, he squatted over the trap and inserted the muzzle of his blast-gun between the jaws. Slowly he applied leverage, and in another moment the Scalie was able to withdraw its foot. It rose and sought to run, then collapsed as its injured member proved incapable of support.

"Better let me have a look at that," Gill said. He ran his fingers gently over the Scalie's tiny, oddly-jointed foot. It was badly swollen, but no bones seemed to be broken.

PRODUCING a roll of bandage from the first-aid kit in his pack, Gill bound the foot tightly. The Scalie watched these ministrations with a kind of incredulous interest.

"There!" Gill said finally. "That ought to help. And here's something by way of a consolation prize." He straightened and removed the bead necklace from where it was hanging. The Scalie took the gift eagerly, eyes shining as it examined the treasure. Then its crested head swiveled toward a spot in the undergrowth, as though having detected some sound inaudible to Gill.

"Don't move, Gill!" a harsh voice ordered in almost the same instant—Malloy's voice. "Stay just the way you are, or you'll get your blast cut damned sudden!"

Dismay rushed through Gill in an icy flood. Momentarily he had forgotten Malloy and Harper. They had evidently been somewhere nearby, having been drawn to the scene by the Scalie's cries of pain.

Gill cursed himself for his carelessness. His mach-pistol lay atop the pack, but he knew an attempt to reach for it would be nothing more nor less than suicide. Malloy wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

"Come on, Sam!" Malloy's voice sounded again.

Thrusting leaves and branches aside, Malloy and Harper emerged from their hiding place in the undergrowth. The Scalie attempted to flee again and once more failed. It took only a few limping steps before dropping back to the ground. But in another moment it attempted to crawl away on hands and knees.

"Grab the native, Sam!" Malloy snapped. "Don't let it get away."

Harper caught the Scalie by one leg and flipped it over on its back. Producing a length of vine, which evidently he had been keeping ready for just such a purpose, he bound the frantically twisting small form.

Gill watched in helpless anger. "What's the idea, Malloy?" he demanded. "What kind of a crooked scheme have you thought up this time?"

"I'll ask the questions, Gill." With his pointed rifle as a silent reminder of mastery, Malloy stepped closer. His narrow face was creased in a thin smile. "What are you doing here? Maybe figuring to steal a jump on me and Sam, eh? Oh maybe you figured to cut our blasts, so we coudn't turn you over to the law."

"Maybe," Gill said.

"WELL, IT'S going to work the other way around," Malloy returned. "You being here saves me a lot of trouble, Gill. I was going to take care of you one way or another. I didn't like you cold-shouldering me and Sam. I didn't like it at all."

Malloy moved without any visible sign of warning. He swung the barrel of his rifle in a short, hard arc to the side of Gill's head.

Dazed with pain and shock, Gill staggered back. The rifle barrel

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whipped forward again. Gill fell, a crashing, scintillant darkness blanketing his mind.

Malloy looked down at him for a moment, his lips stretched over his teeth and his pale eyes filled with a wild glitter. Then he swung one of his heavy plastic boots in a jolting kick to Gill's side.

"That's what happens to people who get tough with me," he grated. He turned his pale eyes to Harper. "Tie his hands up, and we'll get out of here."

"Sure, Duff." Harper moved with a nervous haste, his fleshy face a little pale. He bound Gill's hands behind his back, then grasped him under the armpits and wheezingly helped him to regain his feet.

Gill swayed, holding himself erect with an effort. He felt numbed and leaden, and a dull agony beat through him in quick, heavy surges. Something warm and wet trickled down the side of his face from the spot where the rifle barrel had smashed into his head.

Malloy prodded Gill's back with his weapon. "Start moving. Sam and I made camp not far from here, and you're going to keep us company."

Guided by Malloy's harsh voice and the prods of the rifle, Gill set out through the undergrowth. Harper brought up the rear, carrying the Scalie and Gill's pack.

A SHORT time later they reached a clearing that had been made within a rough circle formed by a group of tall trees. A tent stood in the middle of this.

Gill saw that the camp site had been enclosed within a light wire-web fence, hanging from supports driven into the trees. In another moment he realized how the fragile net was able to keep out intruders—it was electrified. Malloy, evidently because he had a flitter to carry his equipment, had made his preparations on an elaborate scale.

A curt order from Malloy directed Gill to a narrow space between two of the girdling trees. There was a gate here, and Malloy waved his rifle at a spot above it. Gill suddenly noticed that photo-electric cells had been placed in each of the two trees; obviously serving to switch on and off the current that flowed through the fence.

Opening the gate now, Malloy gestured Gill through it and into the clearing. Harper followed, the Scalie thrown over one shoulder. Malloy closed the gate and once more waved his rifle between the photo-electric cells.

"Now we'll get down to business," Malloy said. He was grinning wolfishly. "Make yourself at home, Gill. You aren't going anywhere for a while. Me and Sam ain't as choosy about guests as you are."

Gill said slowly, "This business of yours has a rotten smell to me. Why did you set a trap for this Scalie, Malloy? What are you going to do with it?"

"What I'm after is bio-pearls, see?" Malloy returned with a confiding air. "Now, I found out that this region is one of the few places where they grow—and the Scalies know just where to look for them."

"I've guessed that much," Gill said.

Malloy looked sardonic. "Yeah? But here's the kick-back. The Scalies don't use bio-pearls to trade with as a rule. There's religion and taboos mixed up in it. They know you and like you, they just up and give them to you, see? Their religion lets them do that.

"Now, I don't figure to waste time cozying up to the tribe here. I like to work quick and fast. So I worked out a way to put the right kind of pressure in the right place, to get

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quick results. You know about the Scalies being what they call telepathic, Gill?"

"THEY AREN'T actually telepathic," Gill said. "They can't exchange thoughts or anything like that. What they have is a sort of hyper-sensitivity to each other's emotions, and this operates only over a limited distance. Men have that sensivity on a smaller scale, especially in crowds, when the result is often mob madness. The Scalies, though, have a constant, communal sharing of emotions. Within any particular tribe, what is felt by one is felt by all."

"That's it," Malloy said. "That's exactly why I wanted this Scalie, here." He gestured with his rifle at the trussed figure of the native, which Harper had deposited on the ground before the tent. "You see, Gill, if I sort of hurt this Scalie, it'll be like hurting the whole tribe at the same time. And I figure if I hurt the tribe long enough, I can make them give me all the bio-pearls they have—and show me where to find more. A clean sweep, Gill! I'll be one of the richest men in the System!"

Dismayed understanding struck Gill. He felt sickened. "But, great space, Malloy, you couldn't be mean enough to do anything like that to the Scalies!" he protested. "It...why, it would be a kind of mass-torture! The Scalies are like children. They're physically too delicate for—"

"Keep out of this, Gill!" Malloy snapped. "Don't get in my way or I'll give you another sample of what you got a while ago. Just remember, you ain't in any spot where you can worry about other people Now, sit down and shut up."

Scowling, Malloy turned to Harper. "Get the stuff ready, Sam."

The squat man hurried into the tent, returning with a tiny, compact electric power unit and a length of insulated wire. He busied himself with these, while Malloy peered intently into the surrounding forest.

"The Scalies know we've captured one of their tribe by now," he muttered. "They ought to show up pretty soon—if they ain't here already."

HE WAITED, keeping watch. Harper brought a whisky bottle from the tent, and Malloy drank from this repeatedly as the minutes passed. Suddenly he stiffened.

"They're here all right!"

Gill saw them then. The slender, tiny shapes of the Scalies had materialized like wraiths amid the undergrowth. They stood in a silent ring about the camp, watching. The captured Scalie near the tent called out to them in its shrill tones, and from the gathering rose a wailing murmur.

Malloy chuckled. "Let's get busy, Sam." He squatted beside the power unit, taking the free ends of the wires in his fingers. While Harper held the Scalie, he touched the bare ends of the wires to the native's skin.

Gill winced at what happened next. The power unit evidently was adjusted so that its current was just strong enough to cause a shock—a painful shock—to the hypersensitive nervous system of a Scalie. Malloy's captive released a piercing shriek. And an instant later that shriek was echoed by the dozens of Scalies ringing the camp. The result was a nerve-shattering din as the communal, emotion-sharing sense of each individual native present reacted to the torment being suffered by their luckless member.

Malloy laughed, his pale eyes glittering with sadistic enjoyment. Again he made contact with the wires he held, and again a discordant chorus of agony rose from the Scalies.

Gill gritted his teeth against the uproar, fury blazing through him. He

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wrenched against the vines that kept his hands imprisoned behind his back, but the fibrous growth was too strong to stretch or snap.

Then Gill remembered a bit of forest lore he had once heard. The vines were too strong to break, but they could quite easily be picked apart. Heart hammering in sudden excitement, he began working on his bonds with a thumbnail.

Shriek after shriek rose from the Scalies. Malloy's mouth was twisted in a leer, his pale eyes held an animal pleasure. Harper was beginning to look sick.

AND THEN a sleek, powerful form thudded to the ground near the tent, apparently having dropped out of the empty air. It was a tiger-lizard. It crouched, snarling, staring about as though in bewilderment.

Gill realized what had happened. The tiger-lizard had been somewhere close to the camp. Retreating before the approach of the Scalie tribe, it had not found escape. Confused and terrified by the mind-wrenching racket from the assembled Scalies, it had somehow lost its footing in the overhead branches and fallen.

Now the tiger-lizard flashed into motion. It bounded toward the electrified fence, seeking to scale its way to freedom. The instant it touched the wireweb, however, it screamed and fell back to the ground. It lay a moment, stunned. Then it was a streaking thing, fired by mindless panic.

Malloy forgot the Scalie he had been torturing. Fright had driven the sadistic pleasure from his narrow face. Shouting at Harper, he seized his rifle and began shooting wildly at the blurred shape of the tiger-lizard as the creature whirled around the camp in a futile effort to find a gap in the fence through which it could flee. The crashing of the rifle added fresh fuel

Again the tiger-lizard hurled itself at the fence, tearing at the wire-web with its razor-sharp claws. And again it fell back, rolling over the ground until it hit the tent. The structure collapsed under the impact of the creature's heavy body, and it slashed madly at the entangling folds of the plastic material.

Harper had obtained his own rifle now, and he joined Malloy in firing a wild barrage into the turbulently billowing folds of the tent. It seemed incredible that the tiger-lizard could escape unscathed, but somehow, in the violently pinwheeling confusion, it did. It shot suddenly from the shrouding folds of the tent—straight at Malloy. Its powerful forelegs, tipped with steely claws, swatted instinctively at the threatening figure that loomed before it, a burst of motion almost too swift to be seen.

MALLOY reeled back with a torn throat, his face a horrible ragged mask. But his last shots had hit the tiger-lizard. The creature staggered drunkenly as it started once more toward the fence.

Harper stopped it with a blast from his rifle, then turned to stare dazedly down at Malloy. Blood was welling from the man's ripped face and throat. It was clear that Malloy would never scheme again.

Harper was still staring when Gill slipped the last strands of the vines from his wrists and came up silently behind him. The rifle was torn suddenly from the squat man's loosened grip. Harper whirled with a startled bleat, and met Gill's fist as it swung in a vengeful arc. Harper went down in a boneless sprawl.

Gill shook his head incredulously as he glanced around him. A few chaotic seconds, and all torment and threat were over. Malloy had perished in the very chain-reaction he had started.

Gill's eyes touched the bound Scalie.

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It lay watching him. Still visible traces of suffering showed in its expression, but understanding seemed present there, together with relief and trust.

"This is over with for you and your people, too, old fellow," Gill muttered. He dropped down beside the native's tiny figure and unfastened its bonds. Then, with the Scalie cradled in his arms, he went over to the fence. He turned off the current and opened the gate, lowering his burden to the ground beyond.

"Go ahead," Gill said softly. "Go on home." He strode back into the camp. No use trying to trade with the Scalies now, he thought bitterly.

A groan from Harper warned that the man was recovering consciousness. Gill bound the squat man's hands with a length of vine.

"*Kaa-hai!* Anybody there?" A human voice was calling.

"*Kaa-hai!*" Gill called back. "Come ahead."

TWO MEN in drizzle-suits and carrying rifles appeared out of the forest.

Harper, fully awake now, suddenly moaned. "The law!"

"Sam Harper, eh?" one of the men said. "Well, this is the end of the outlaw trail for you." He suddenly stared. "Oh, oh! There's Duff Malloy—and not nice to look at, either. What happened here?" The man studied Gill.

Swiftly, Gill explained the events that had led to Malloy's death. The marshal—as the badge visible through his drizzle-suit indicated—began an explanation of his own.

"My partner and I trailed Malloy and Harper into this part of the country. A young woman at the settlement got word of our mission—"

"My wife," Gill said.

The marshal nodded. "She was badly worried about you. She told us we could most likely find you at the Scalie village here. So we flew out. We found the village deserted, but we heard a commotion in the forest and investigation led us here. Glad Malloy and Harper are the ones that got hurt. They're wanted for a dozen robberies and at least two murders, not to mention contract-busting into the bargain."

Harper suddenly pointed an accusing finger at Gill. "If contract-busters is what you want, you're looking right at one! Check his prints and you'll see if I'm right!"

"That so?" the marshal said slowly. "Afraid we'll have to look into that, young fellow. And if Harper's right—"

HE SHRUGGED, and Gill knew what was left unsaid. Eight years of virtual slavery. Eight years of being watched and driven.

He thought of Hazel. Abruptly, he felt sick.

Watching Gill's face, Harper laughed in triumph. "That kind of evens up the score, Gill."

The marshal jerked his head at his companion, keeping guard as Gill's blast-gun and the rifle were taken away from him. Then he said gruffly, "All right, let's get started."

As Gill strode leadenly toward the gate, a small figure limped through the opening. It was the Scalie he had released only a short time before.

"Fwen," the Scalie said.

Gill saw the huge, luminous eyes fixed on him, saw the trust in them. He grinned crookedly. "Friend," he said. "Sure, old fellow."

The Scalie extended one tiny hand. "Fwen," it said again.

"Want to shake, eh?" Gill stretched out his own hand, engulfing with it the native's small one. Then he felt the two round objects against his palm. And an instant later he was staring down at the bio-pearls, each large and flawless in its radiant beauty.

Dazedly he realized that what he held was freedom for himself and life and happiness on Earth for Hazel.

THE END

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